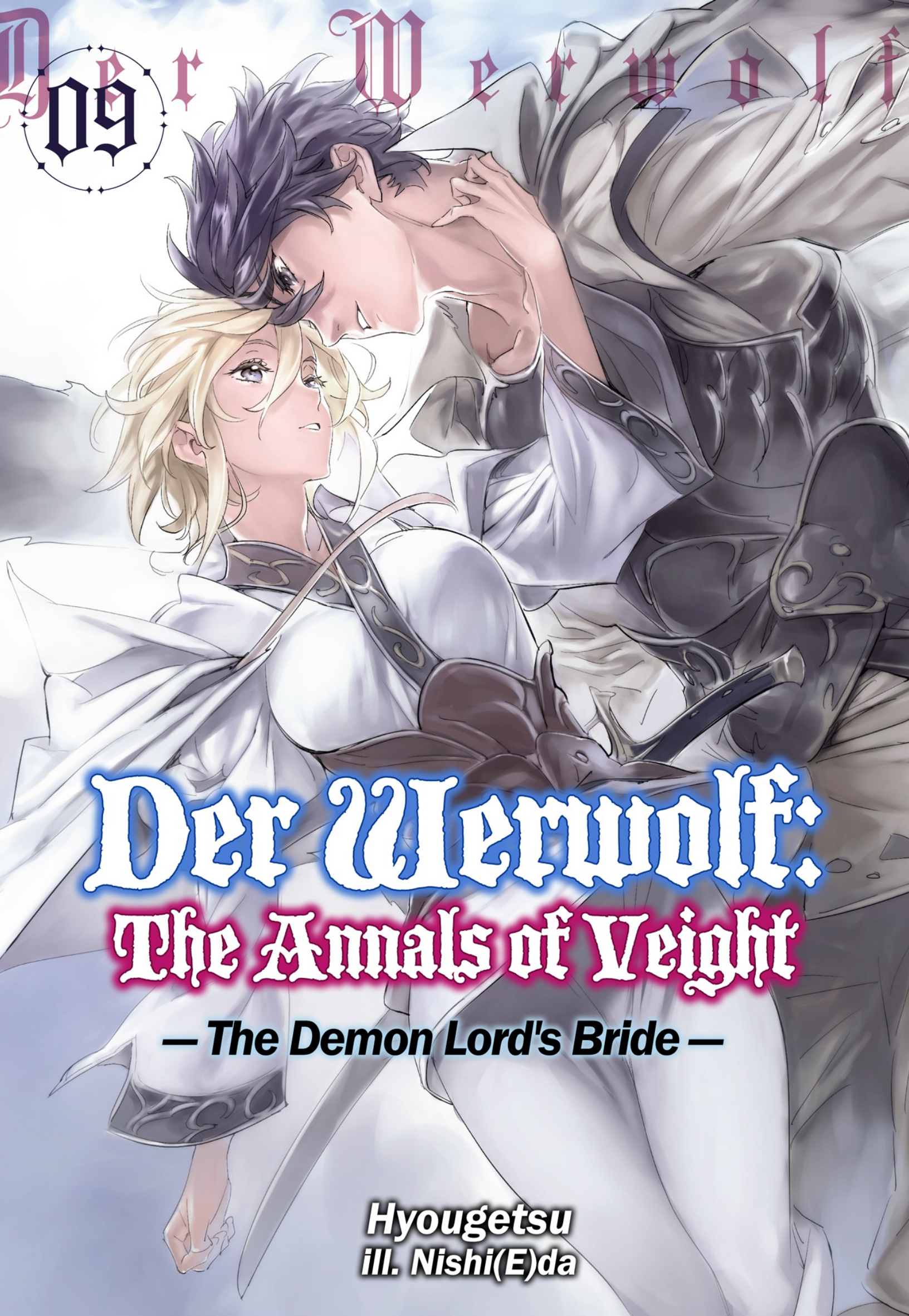
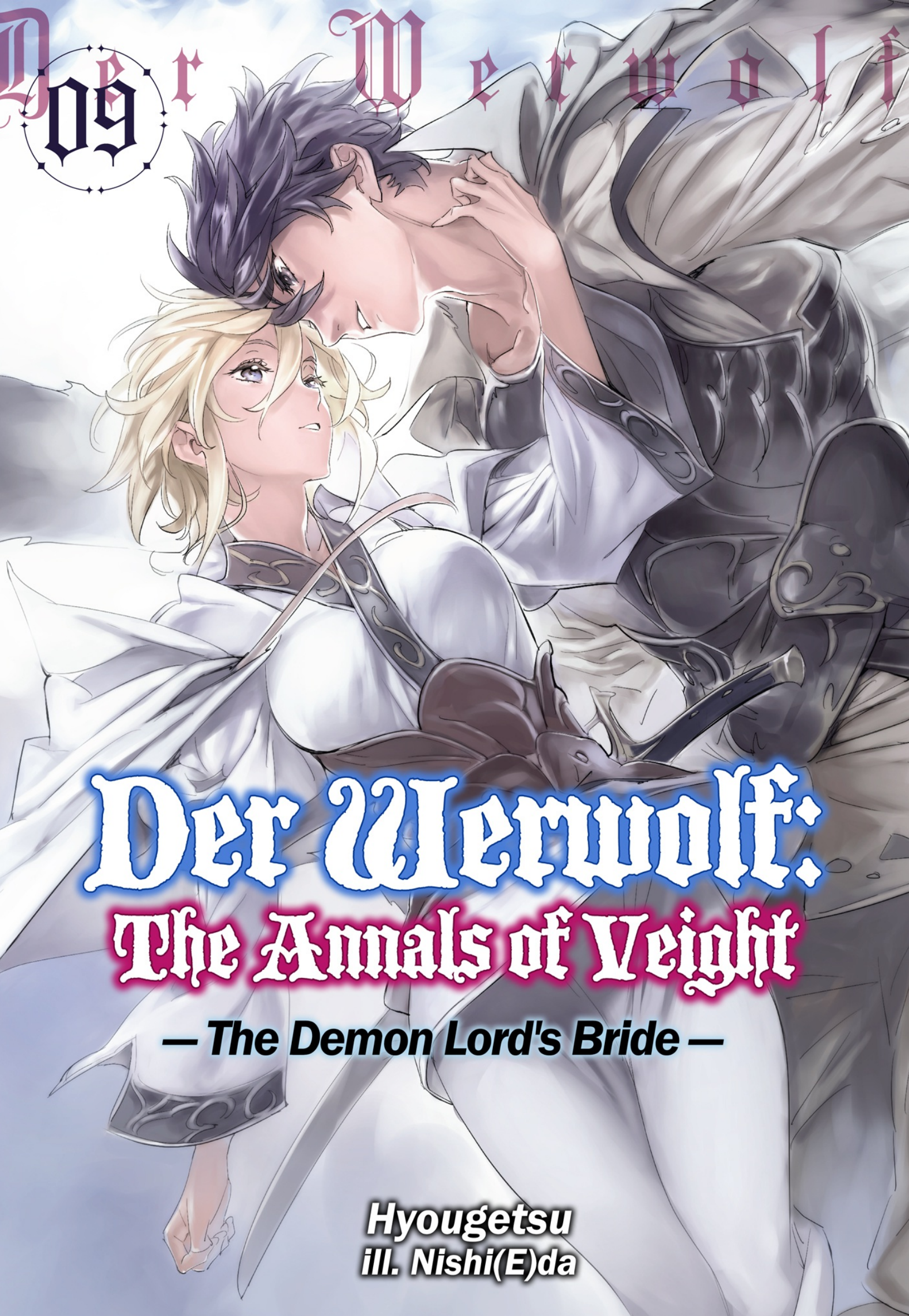
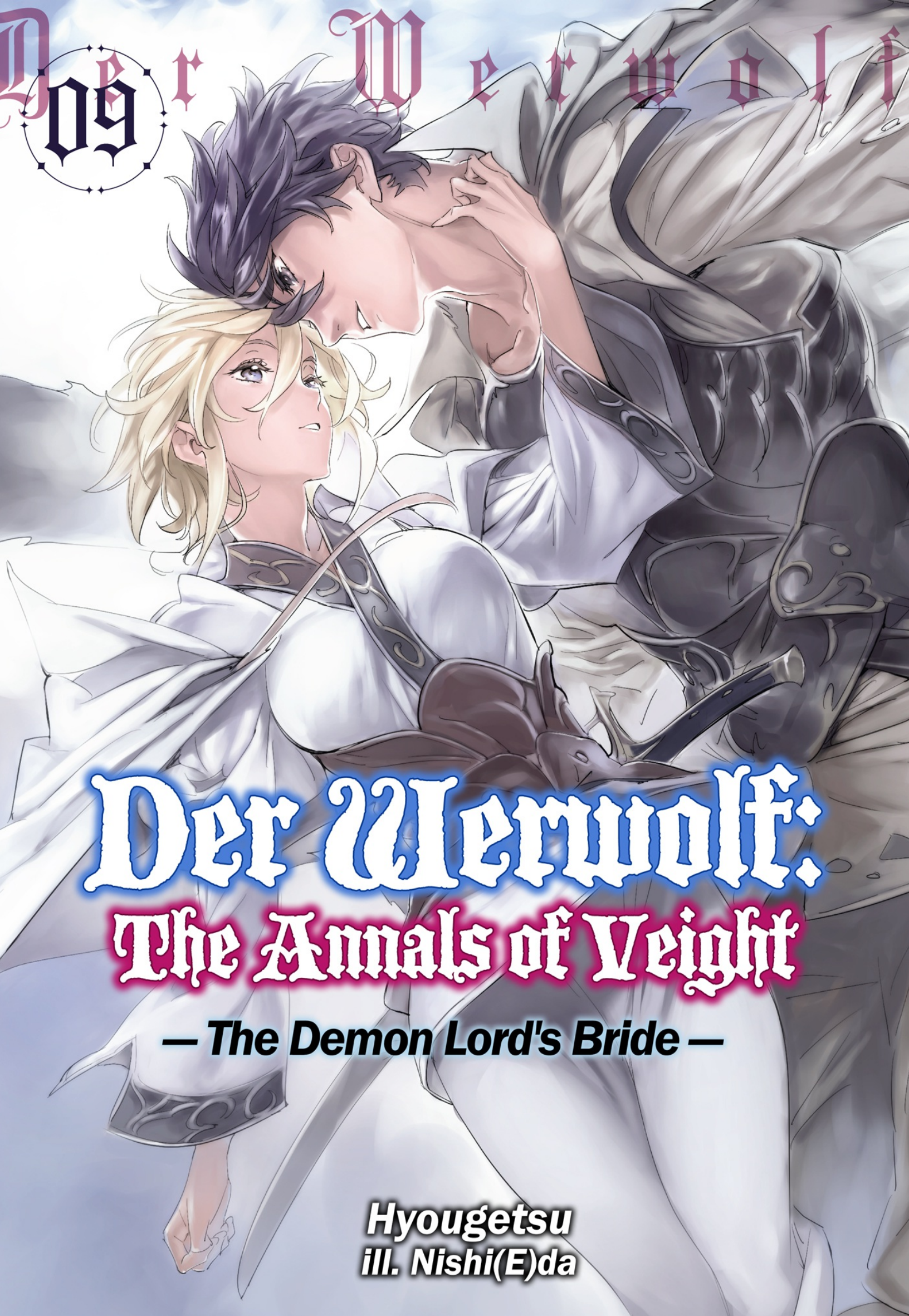
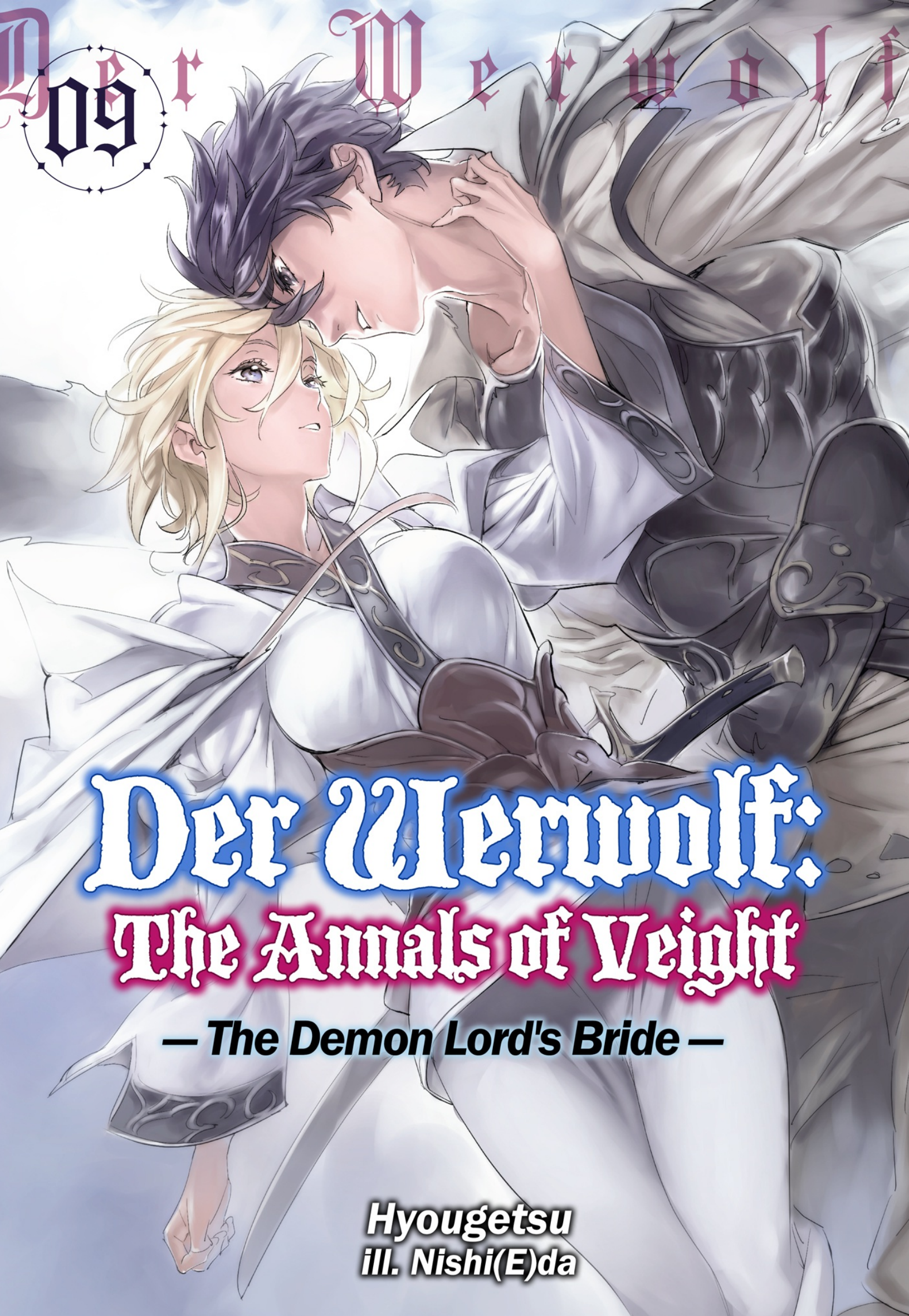
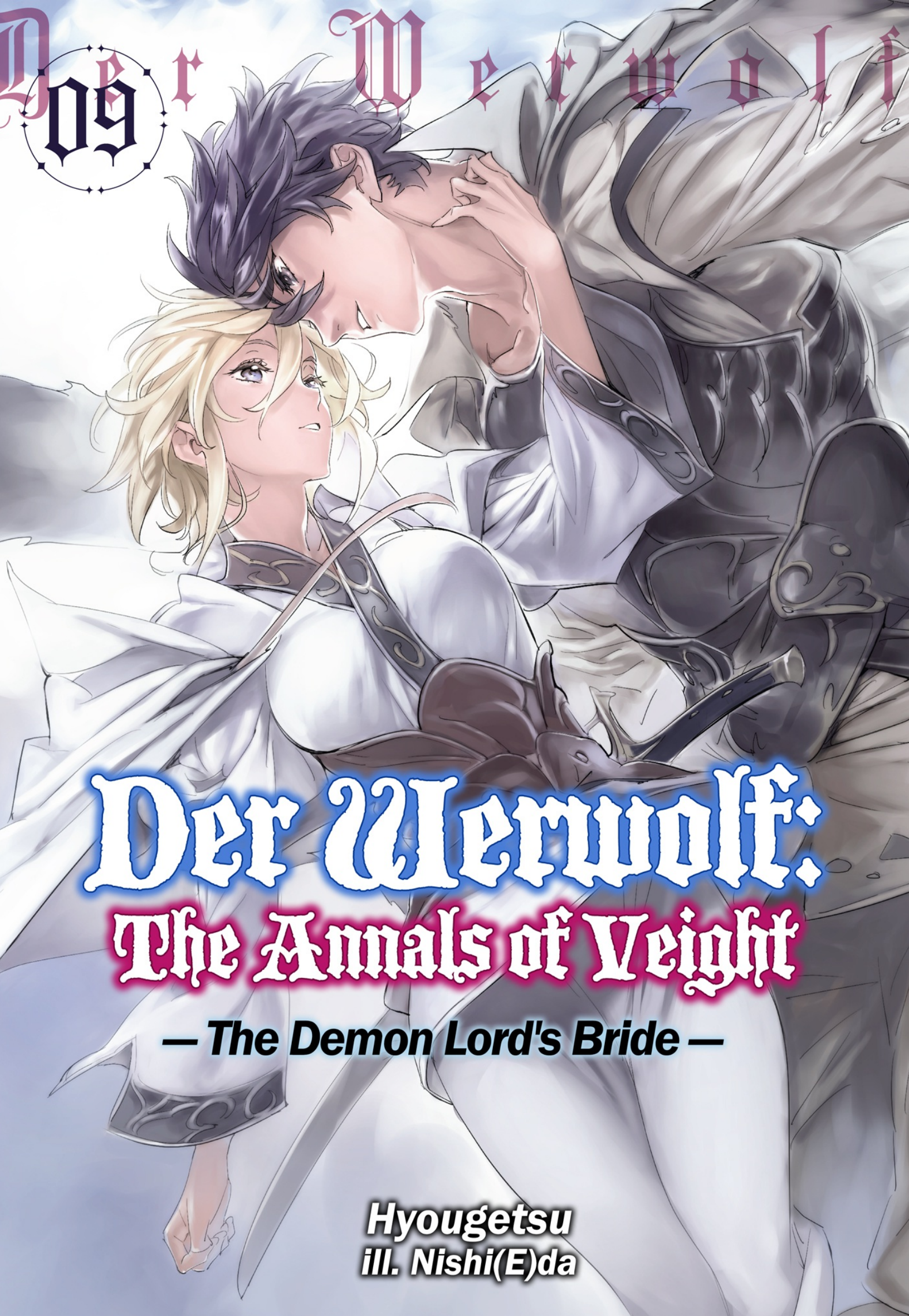
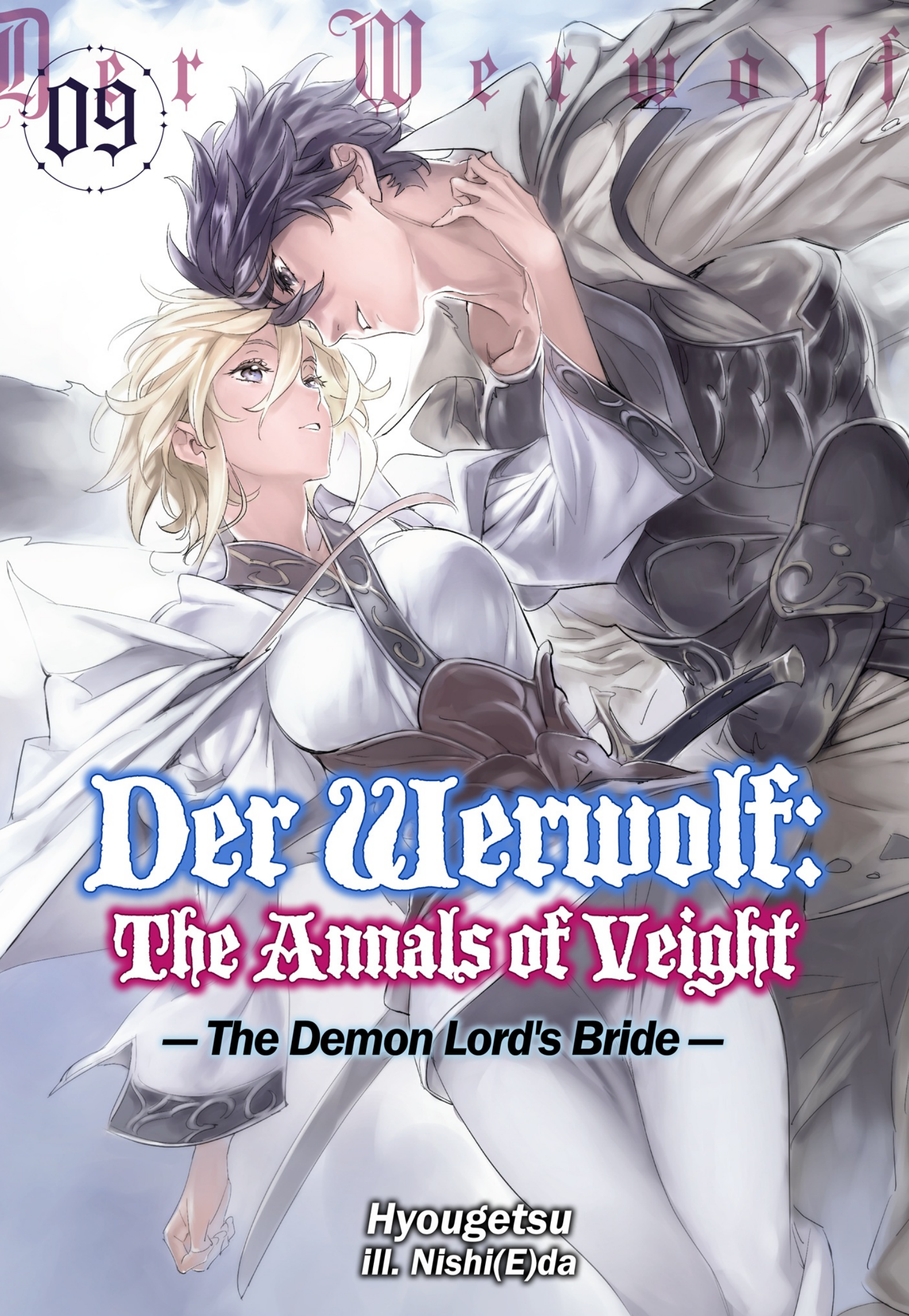
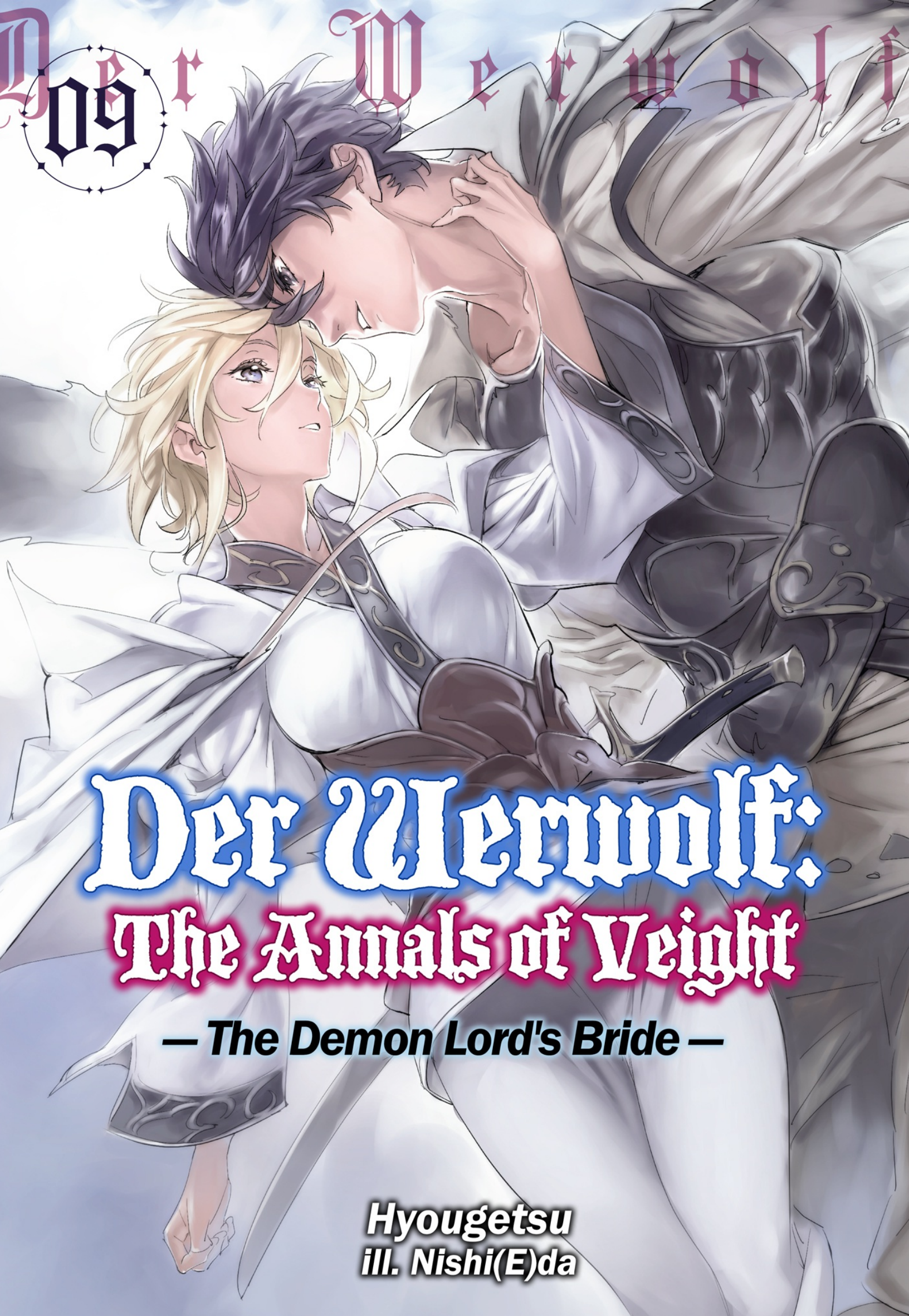
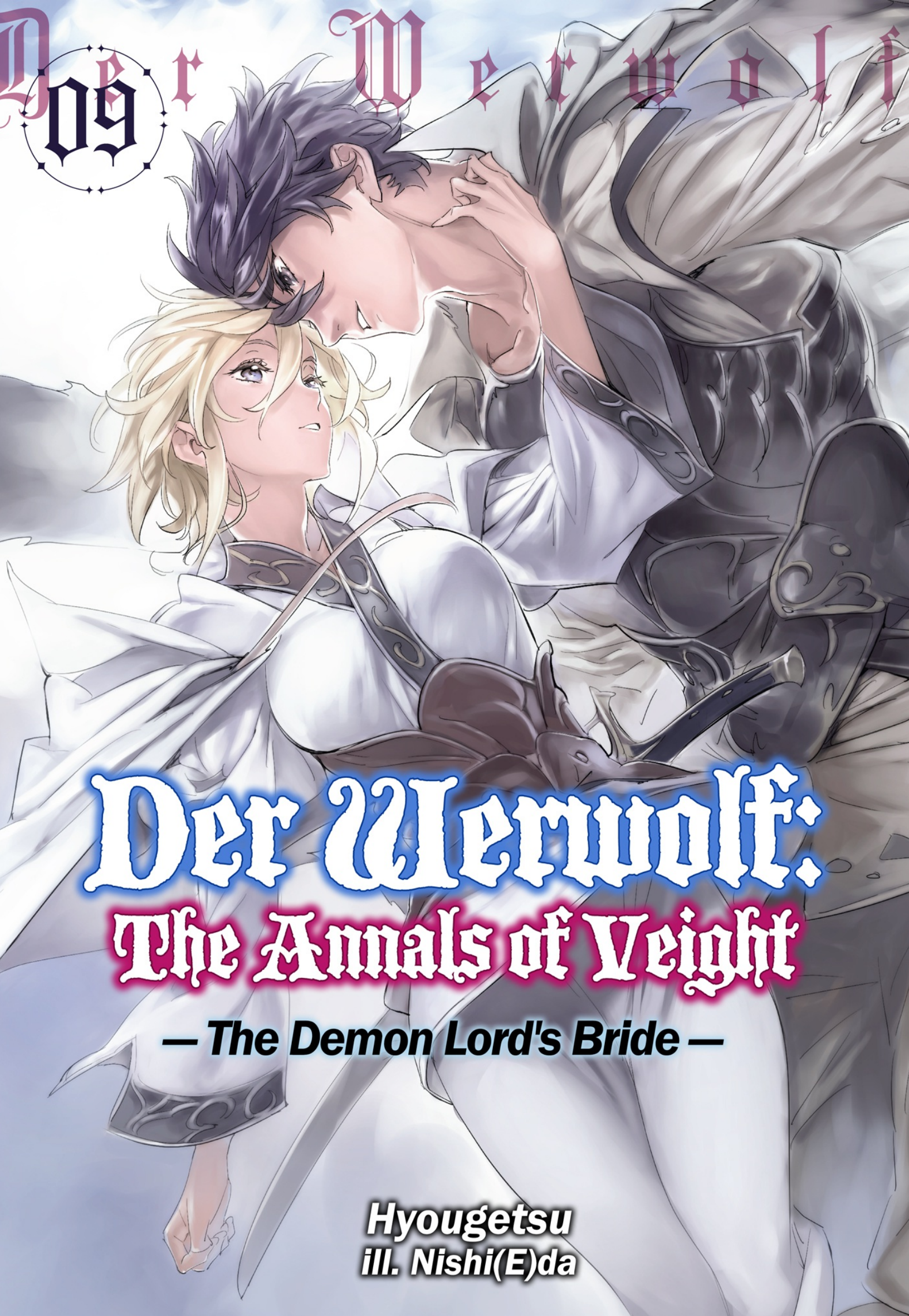
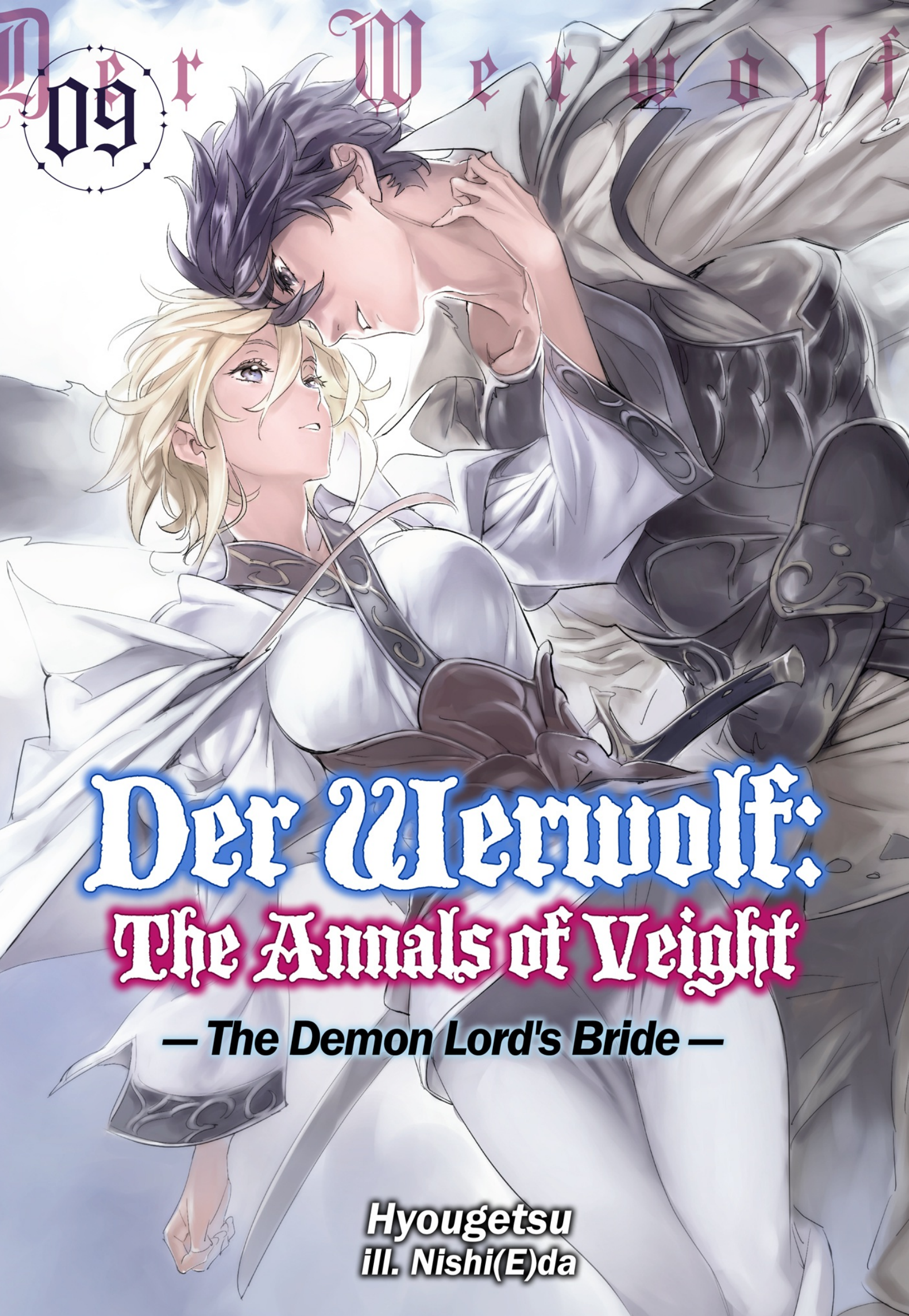
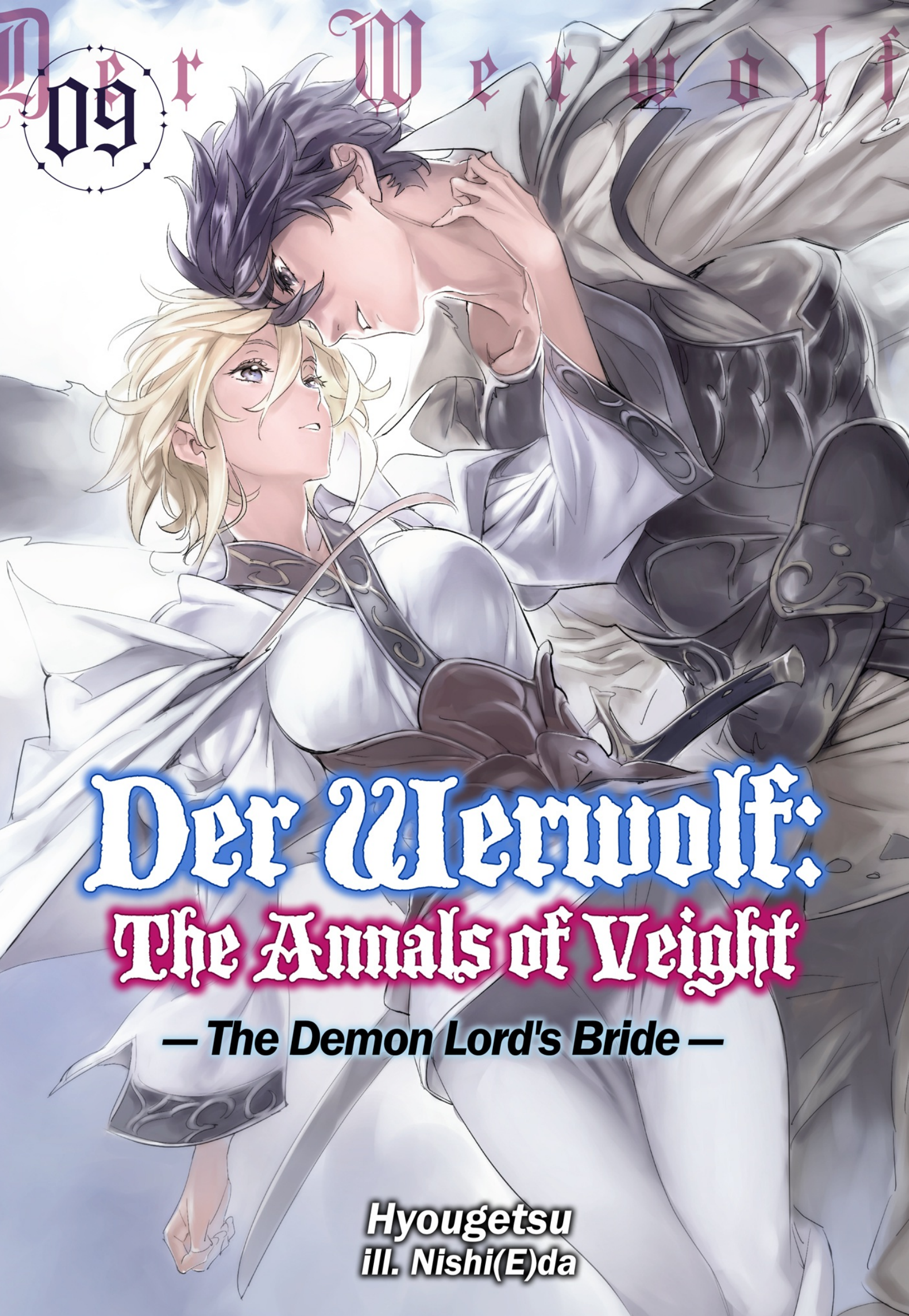
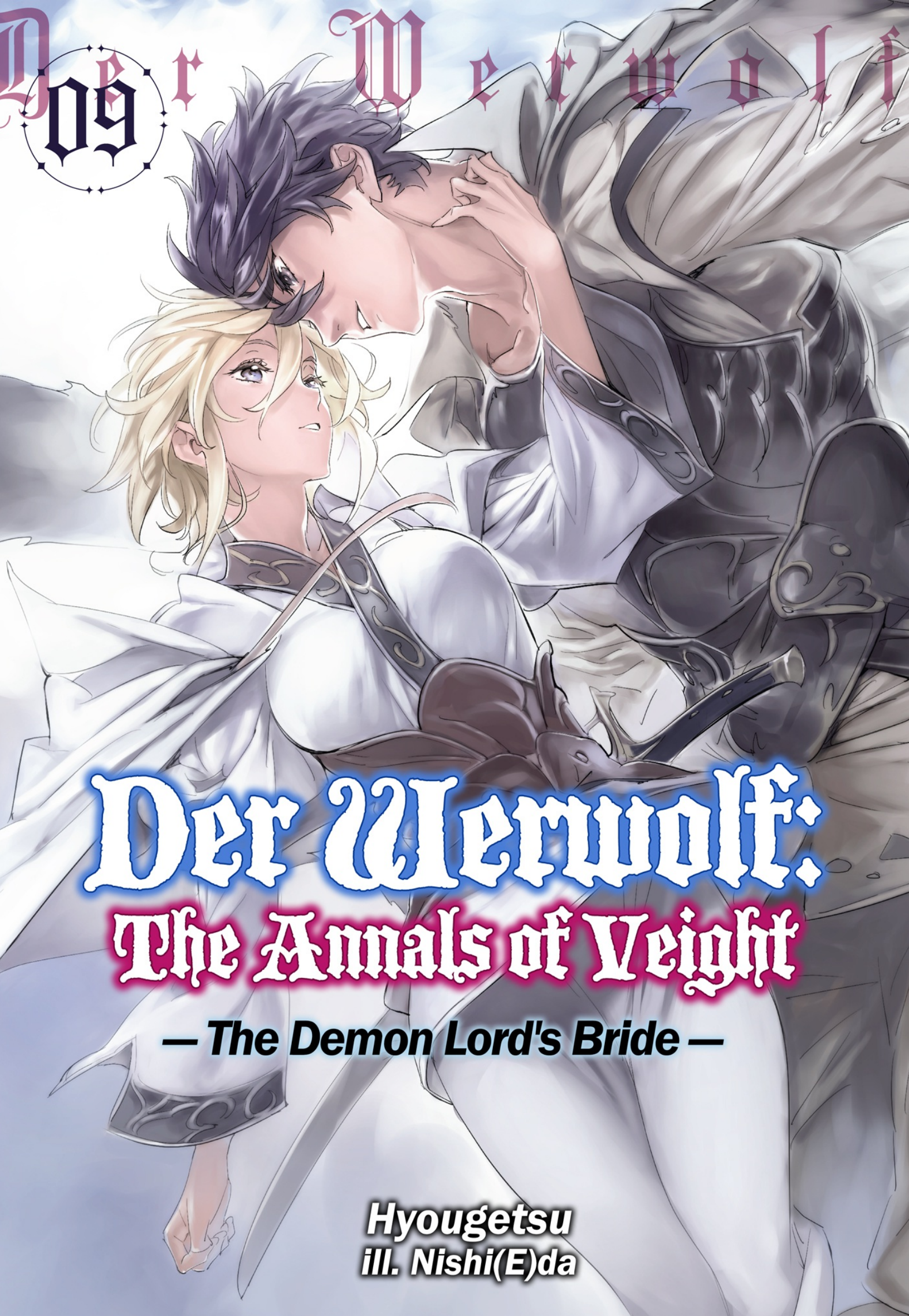
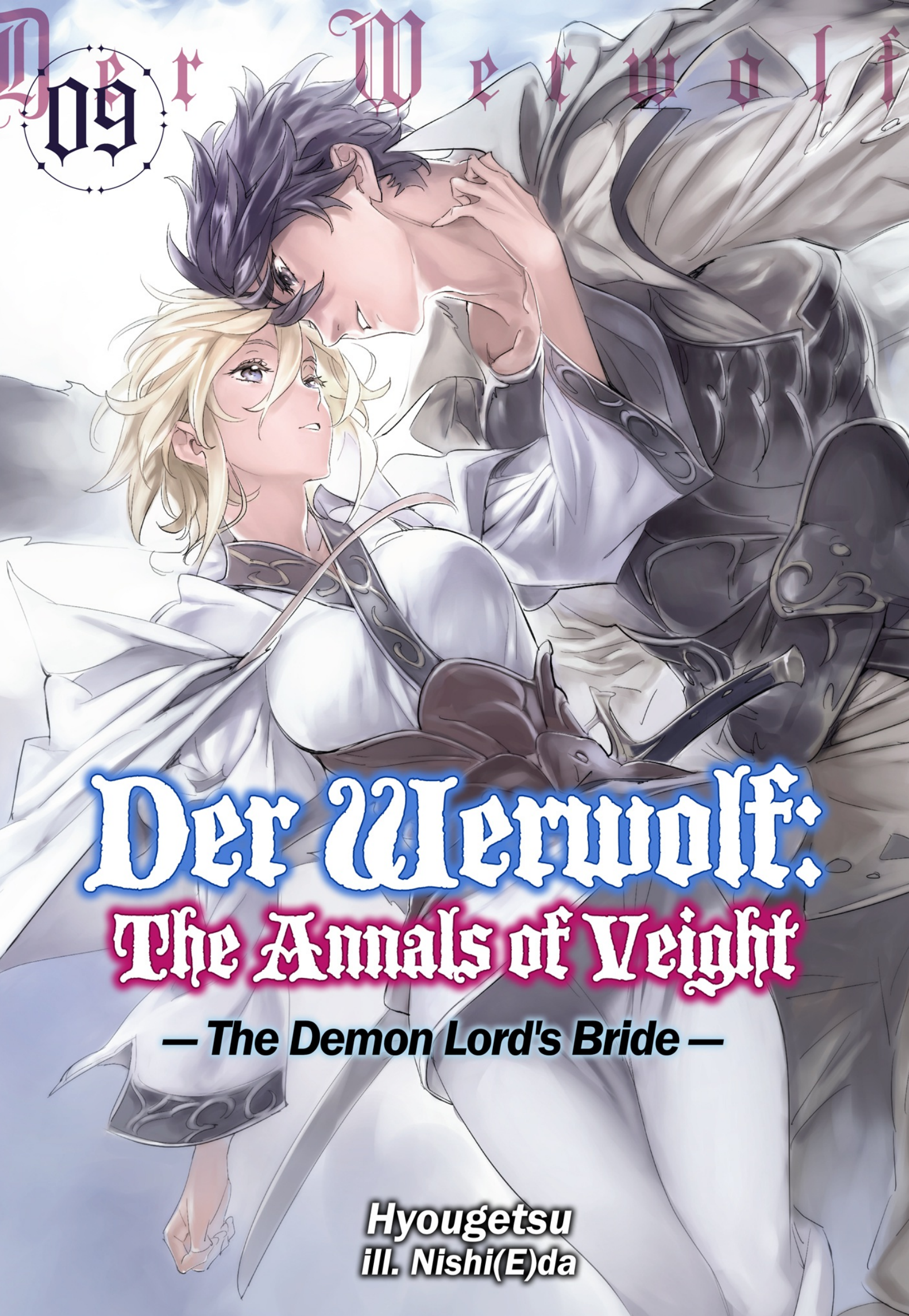
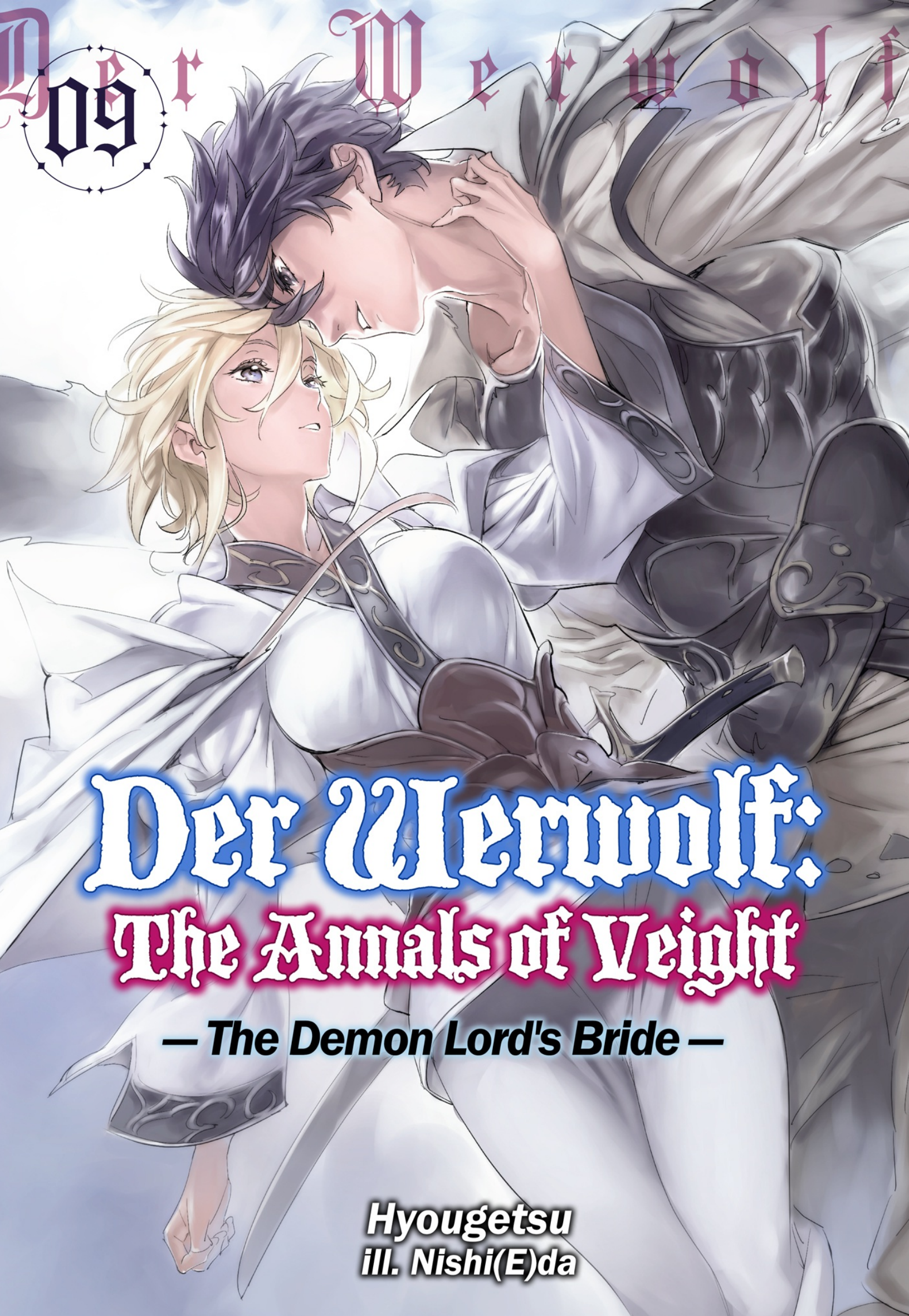
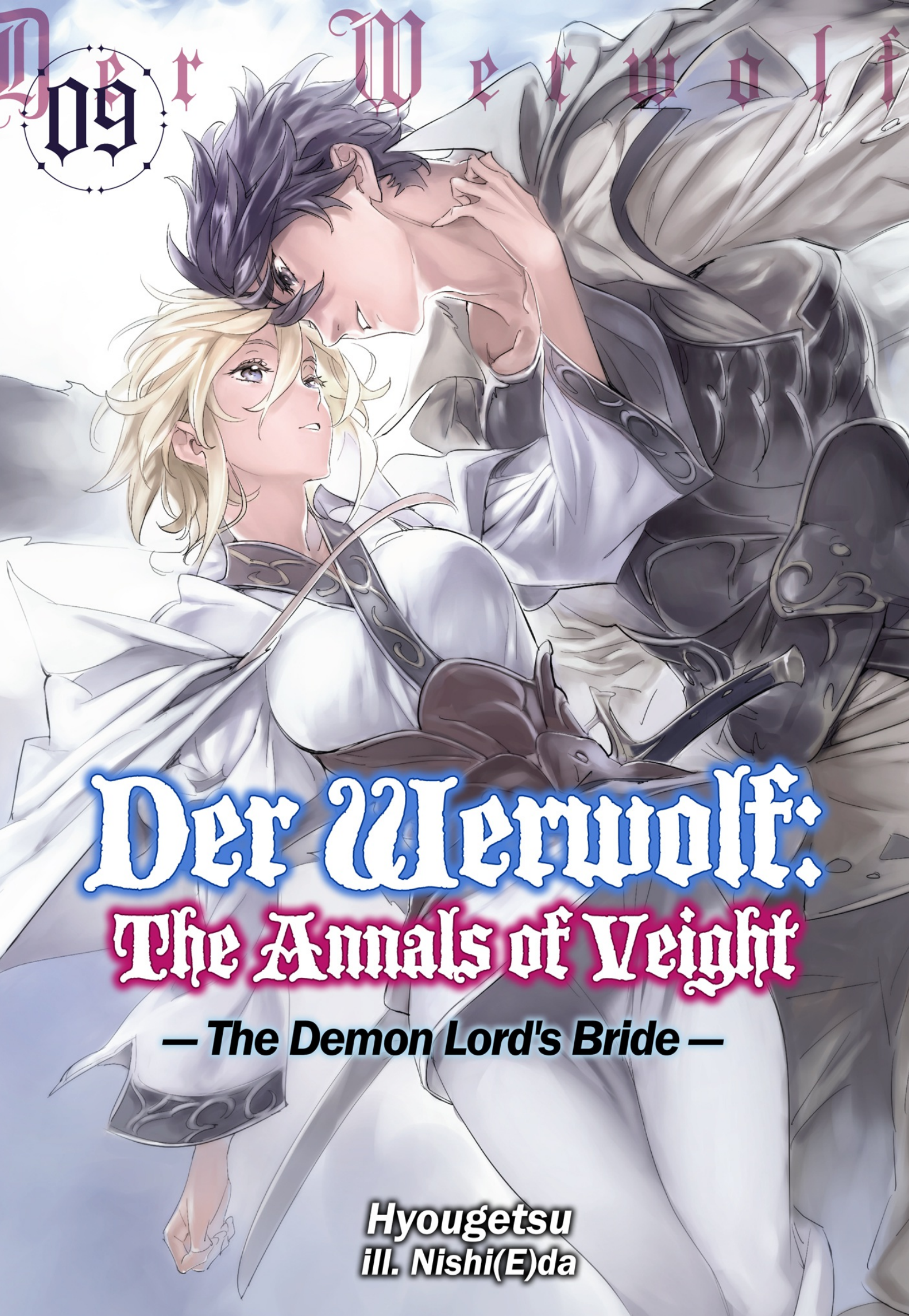
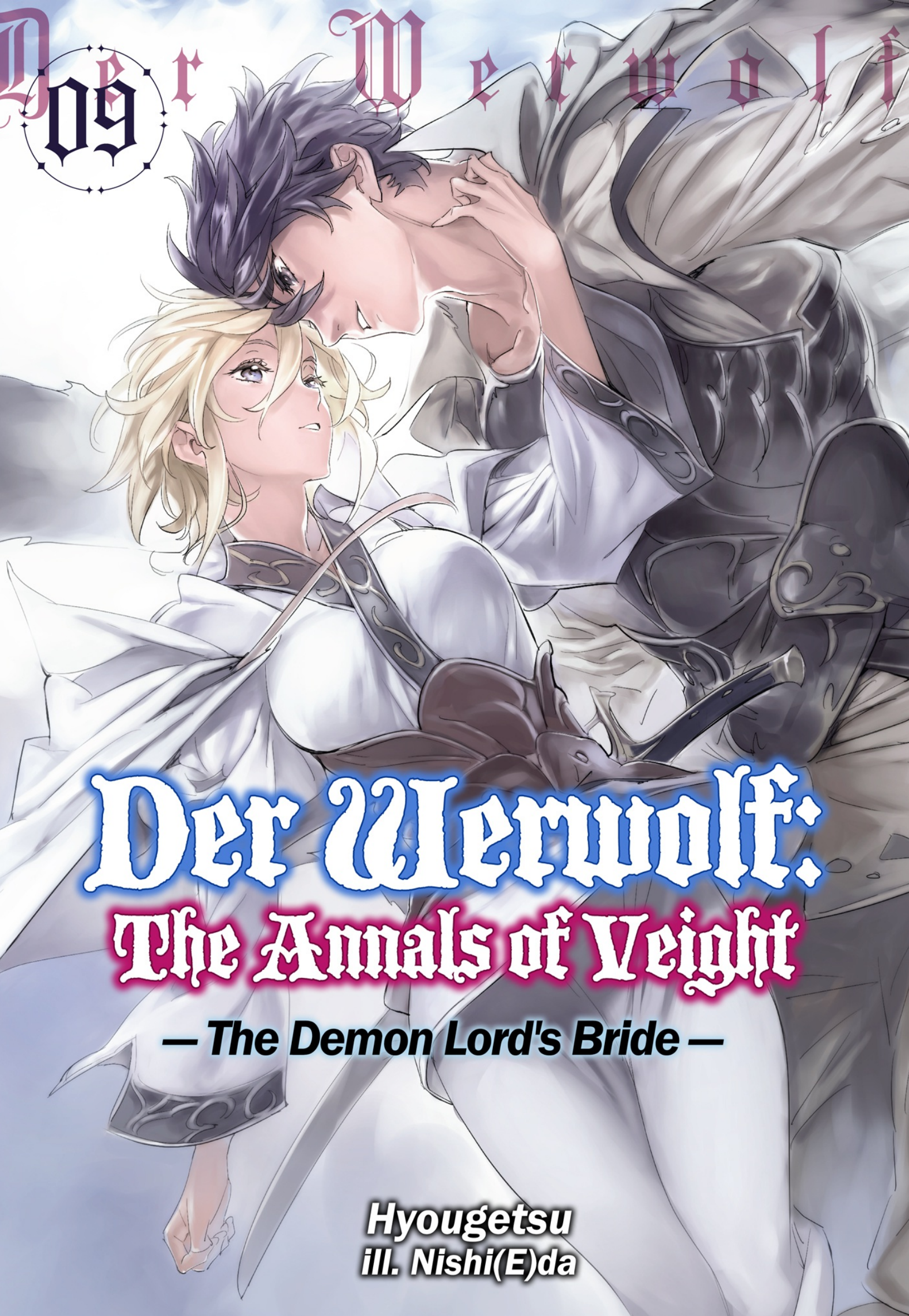
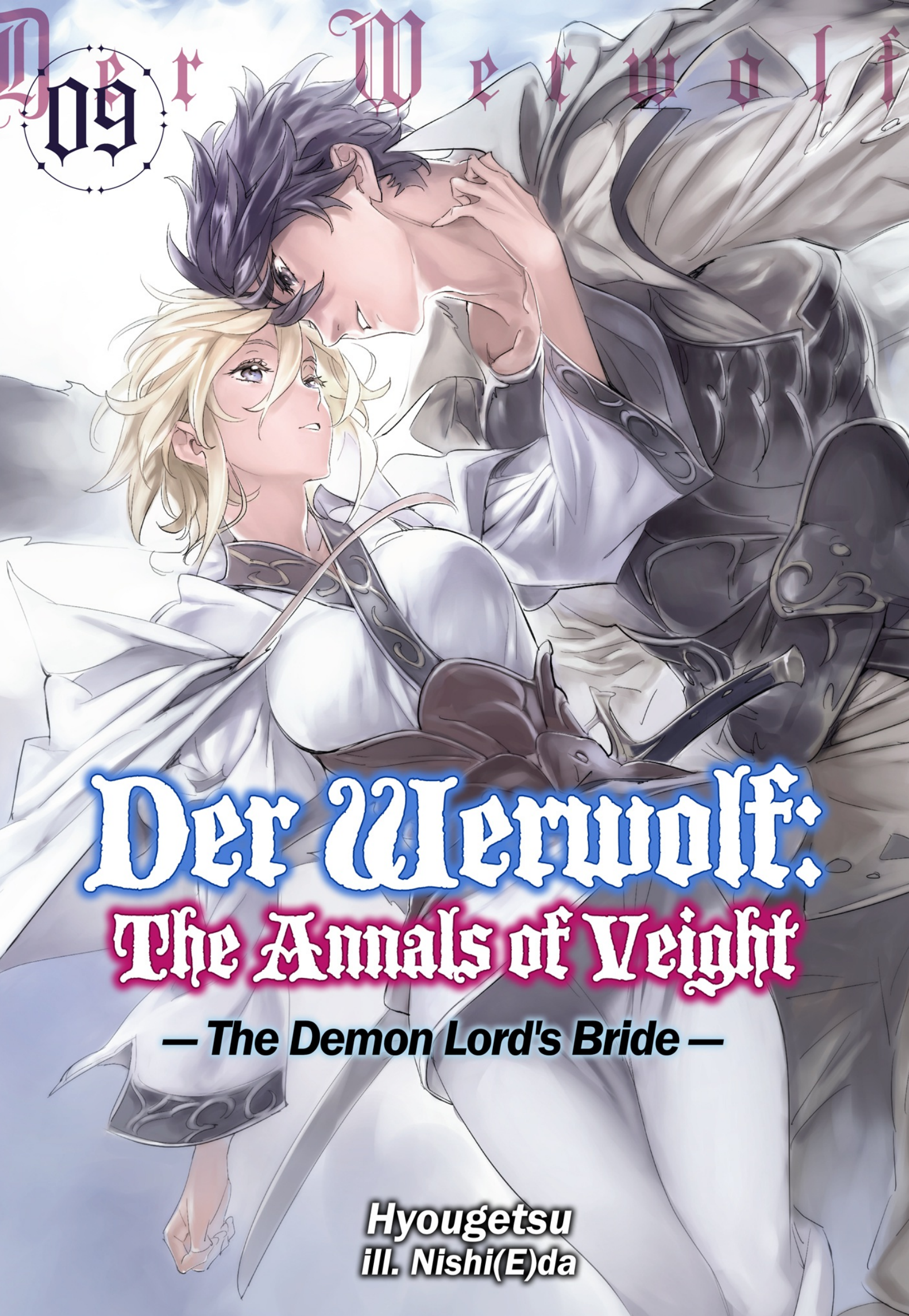
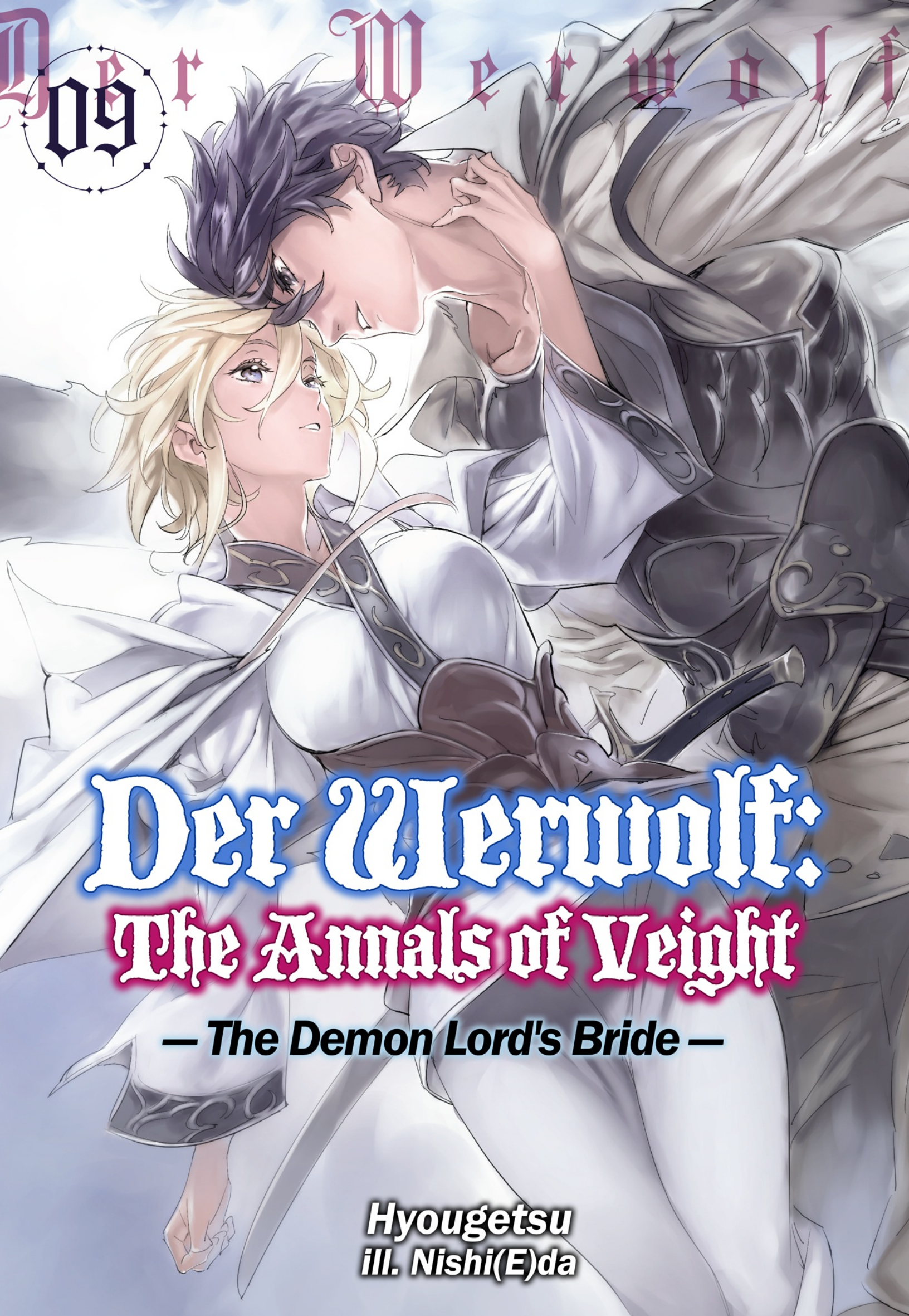
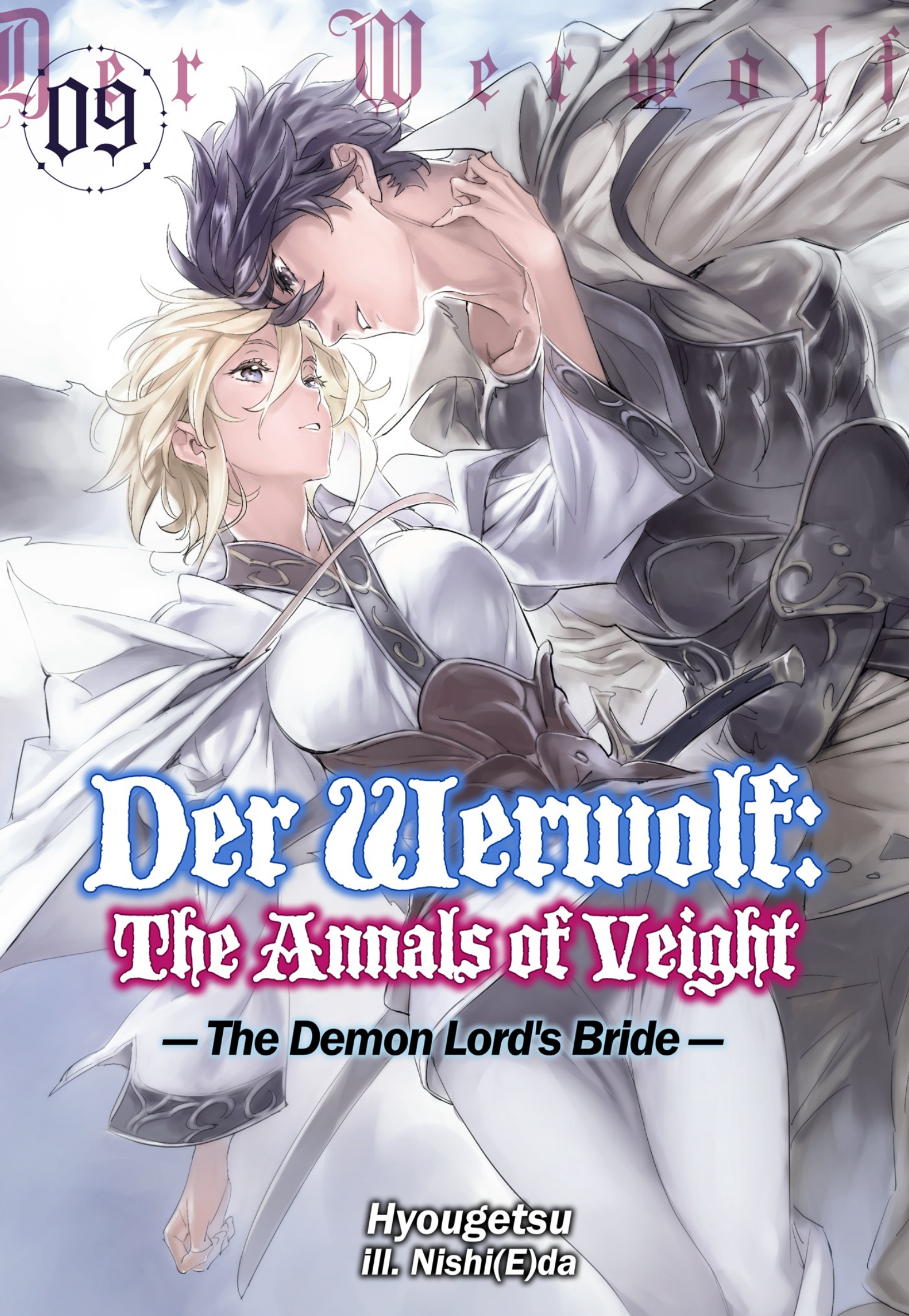
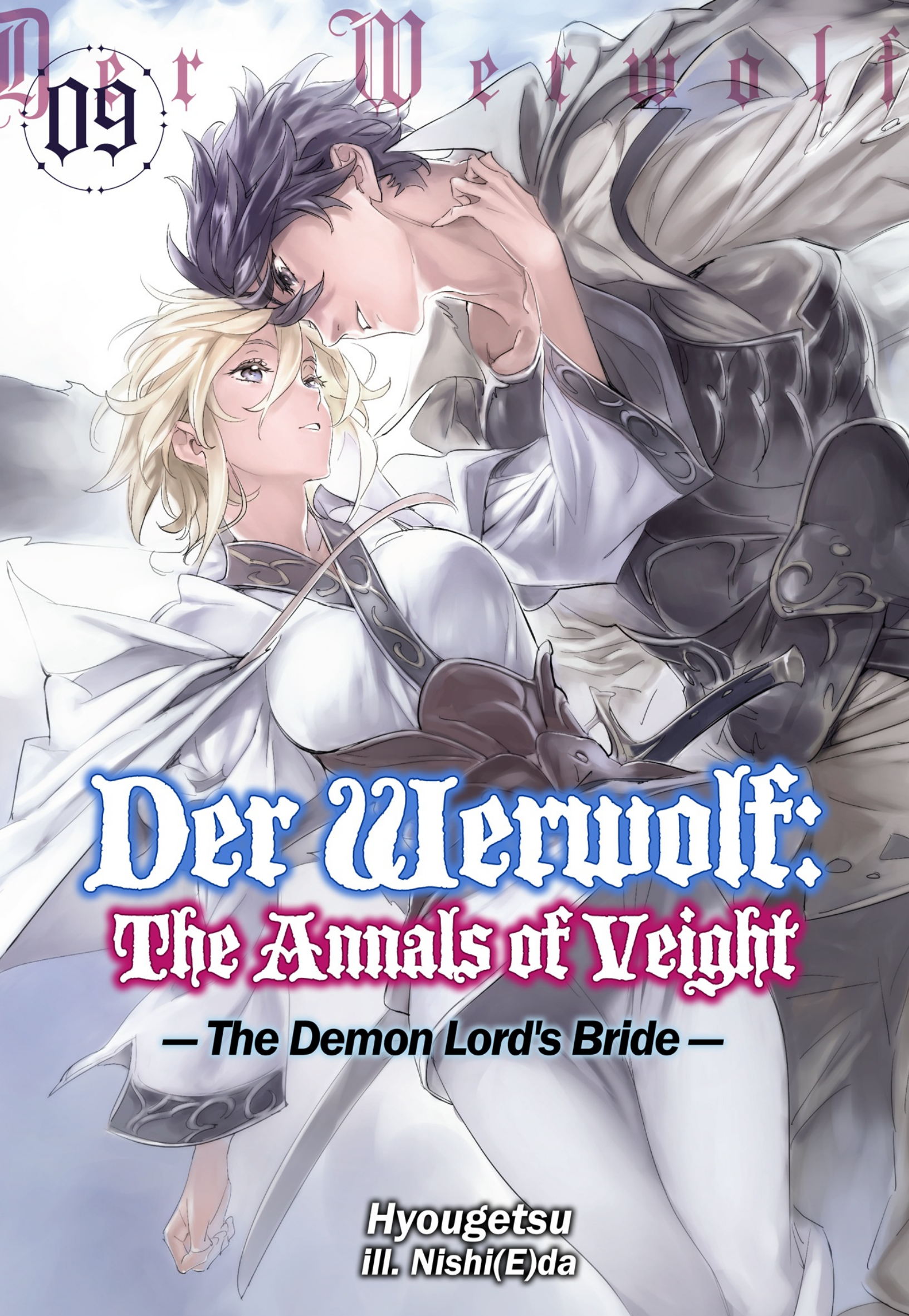
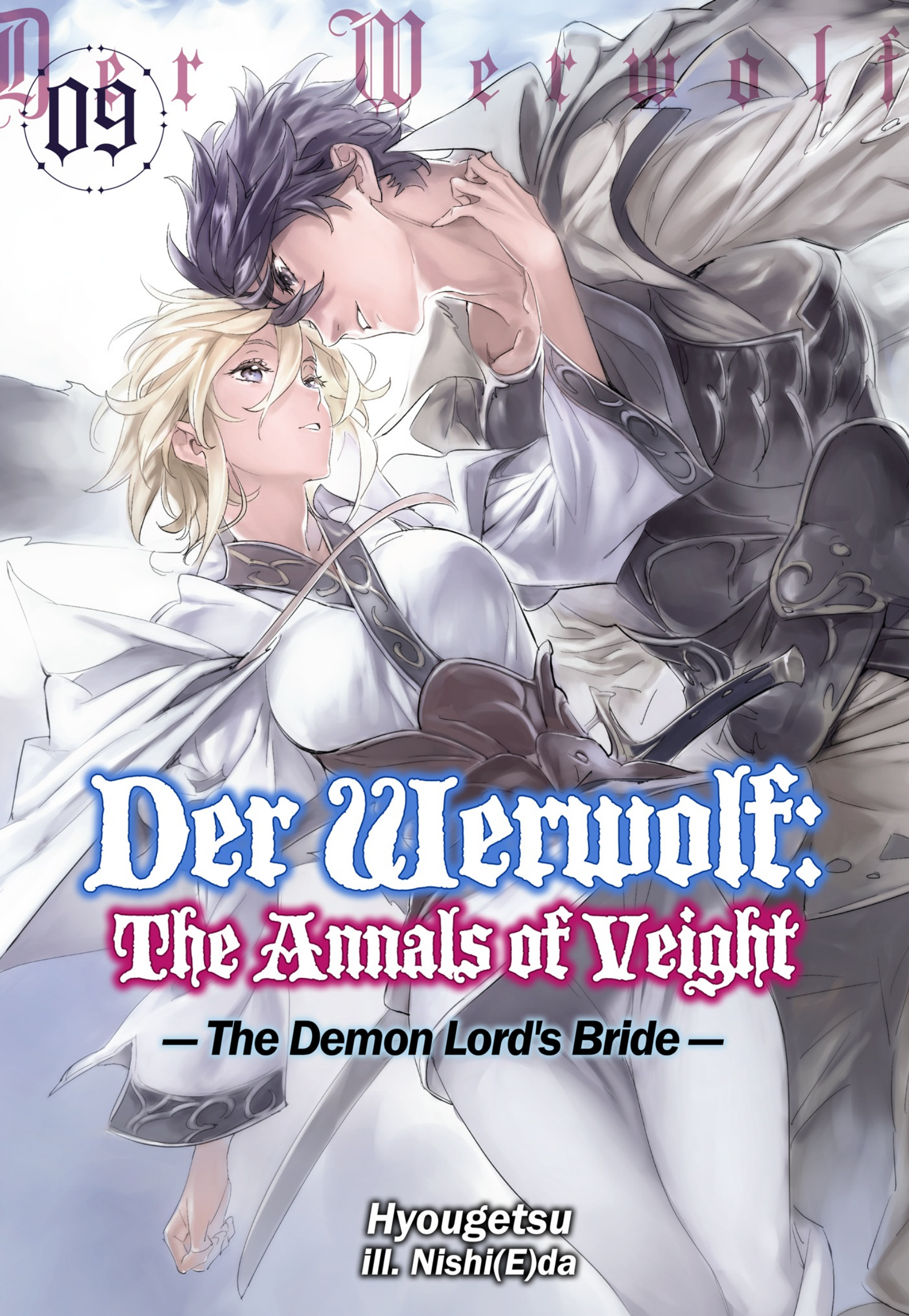
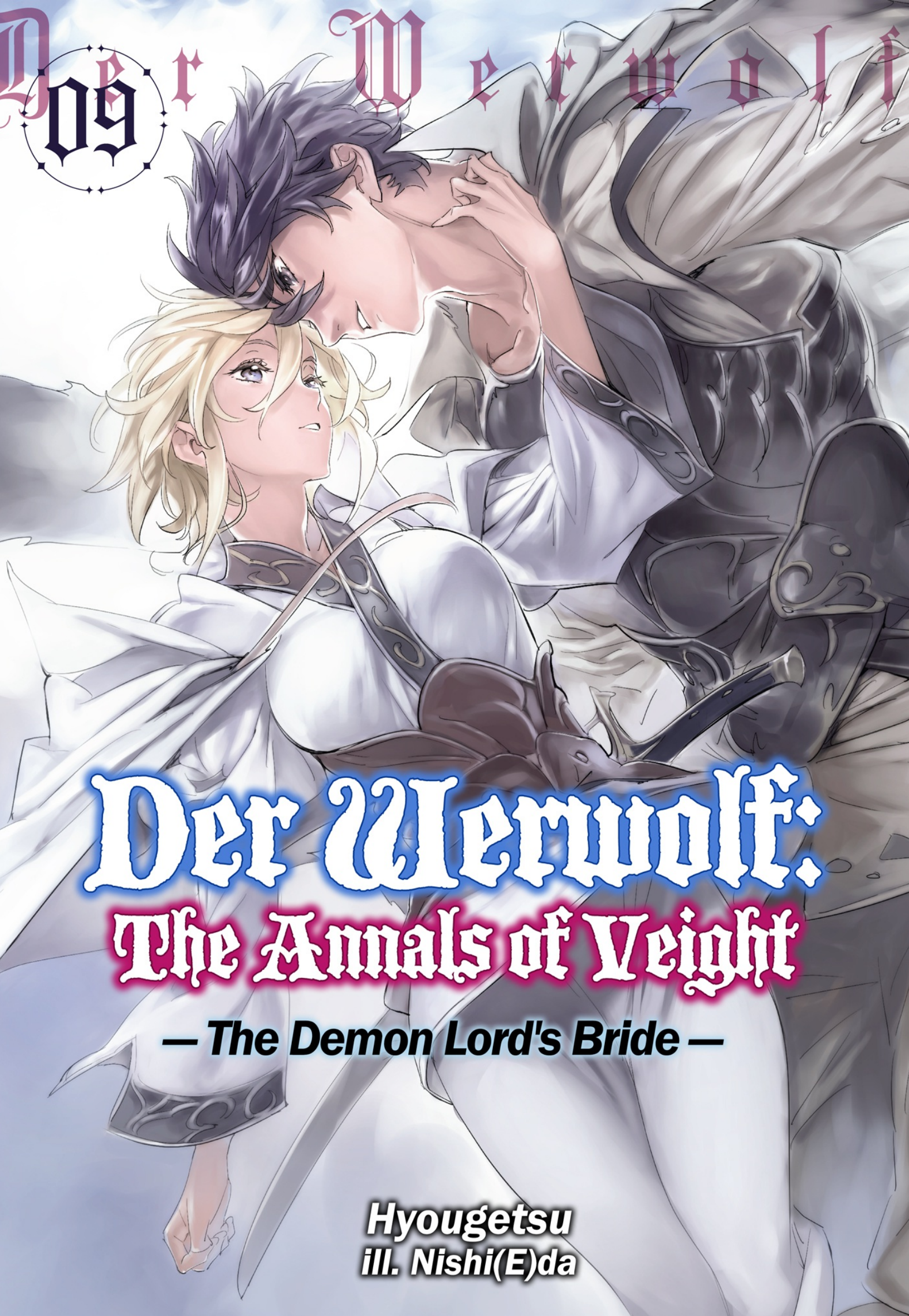
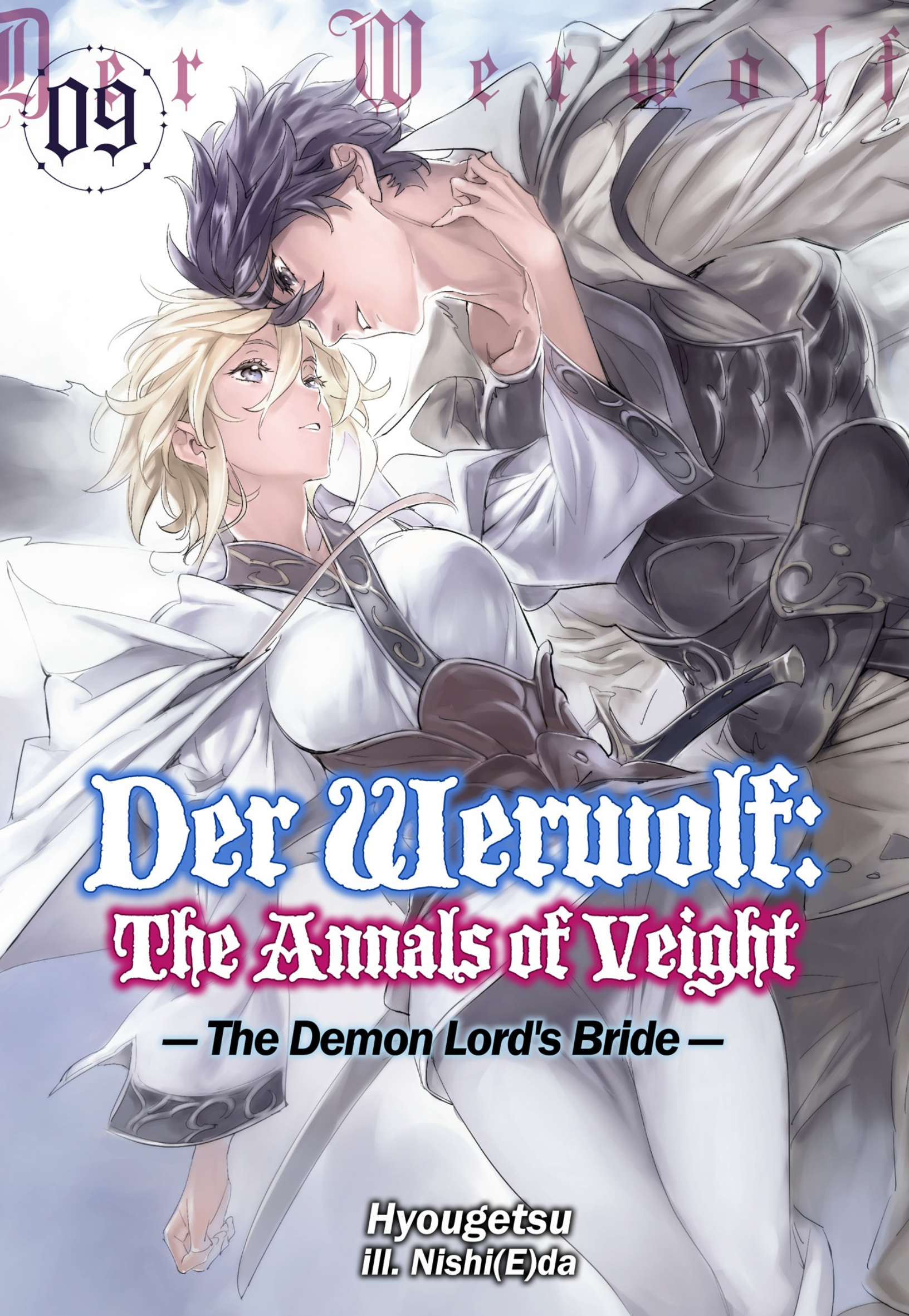
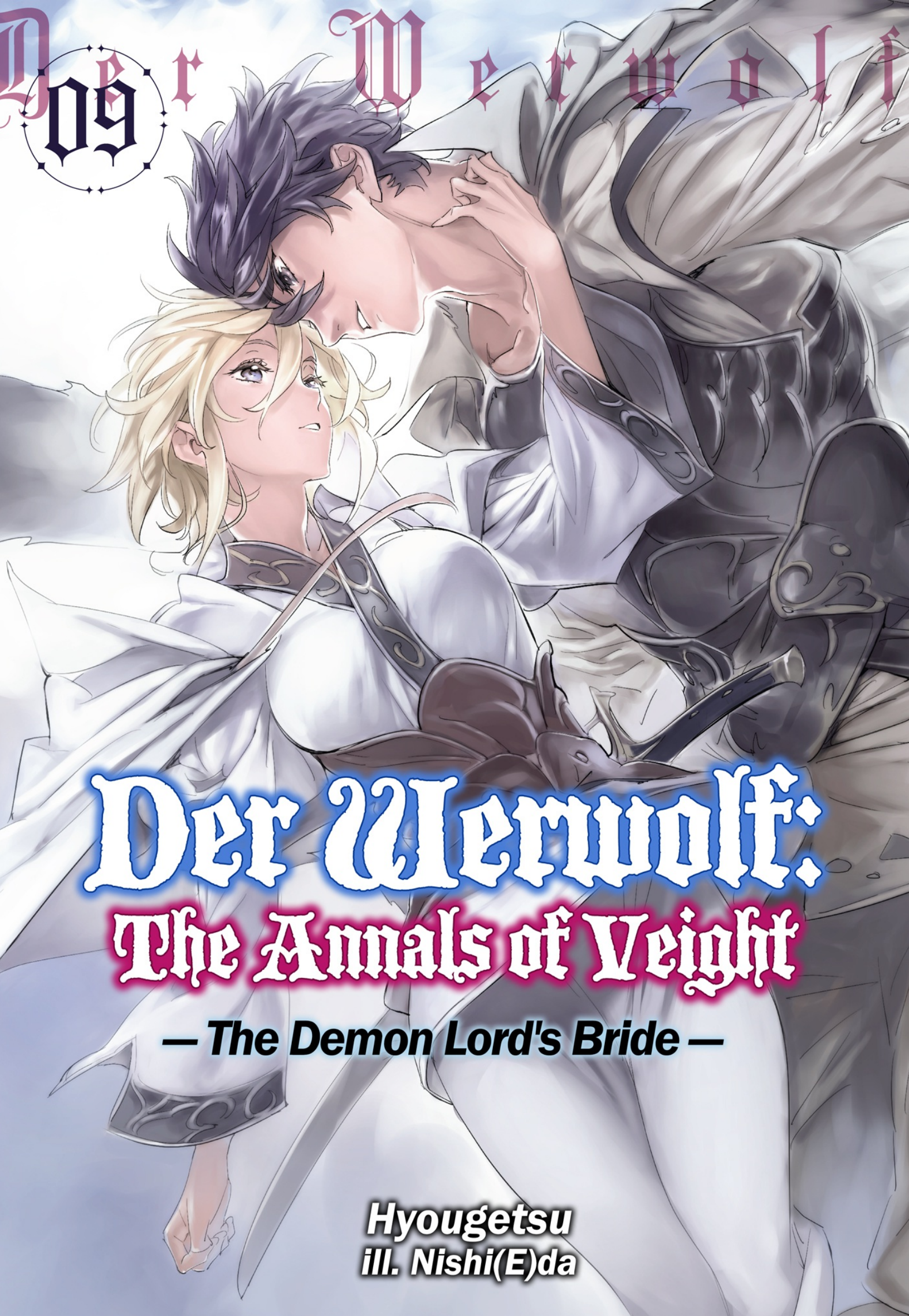
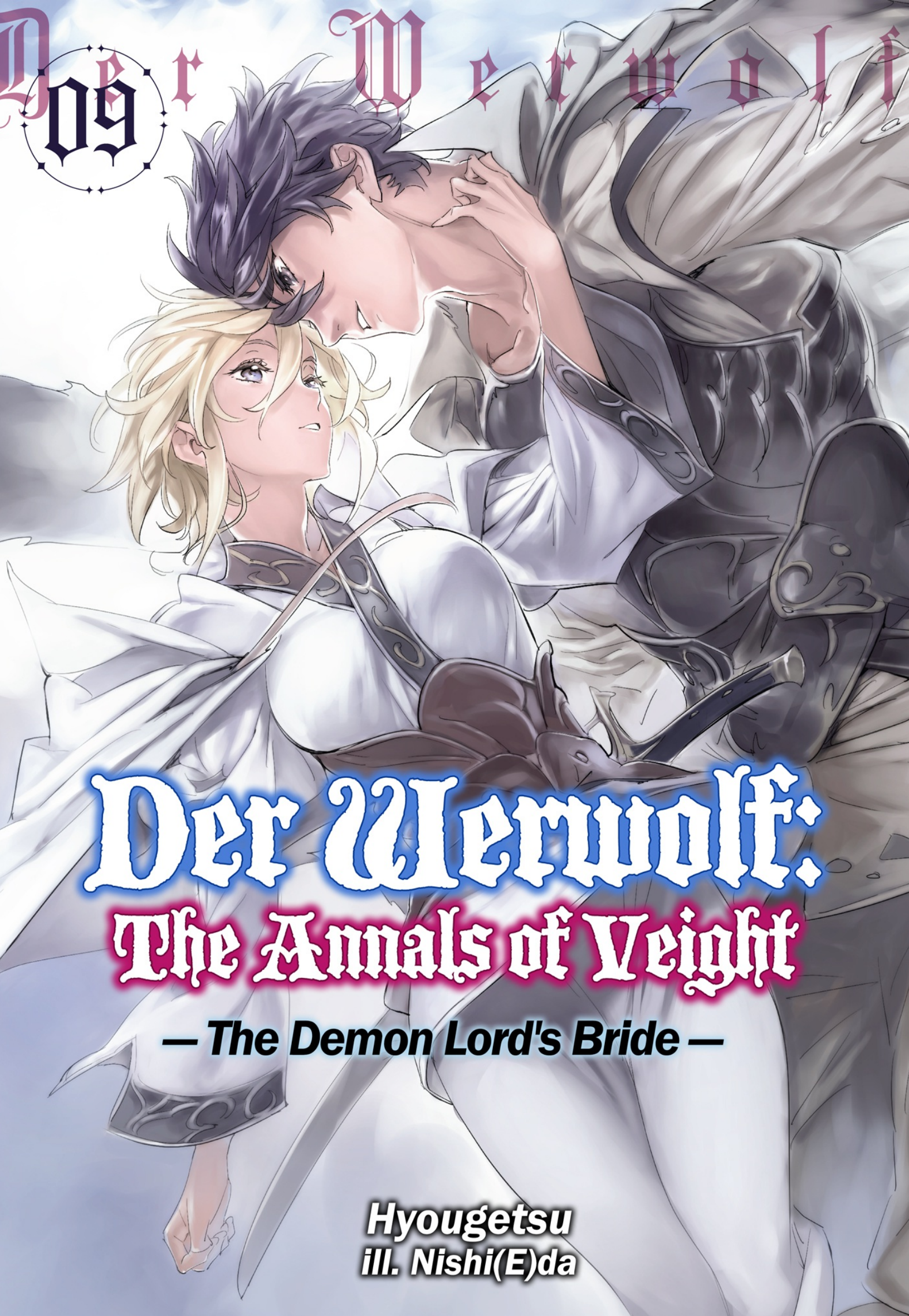
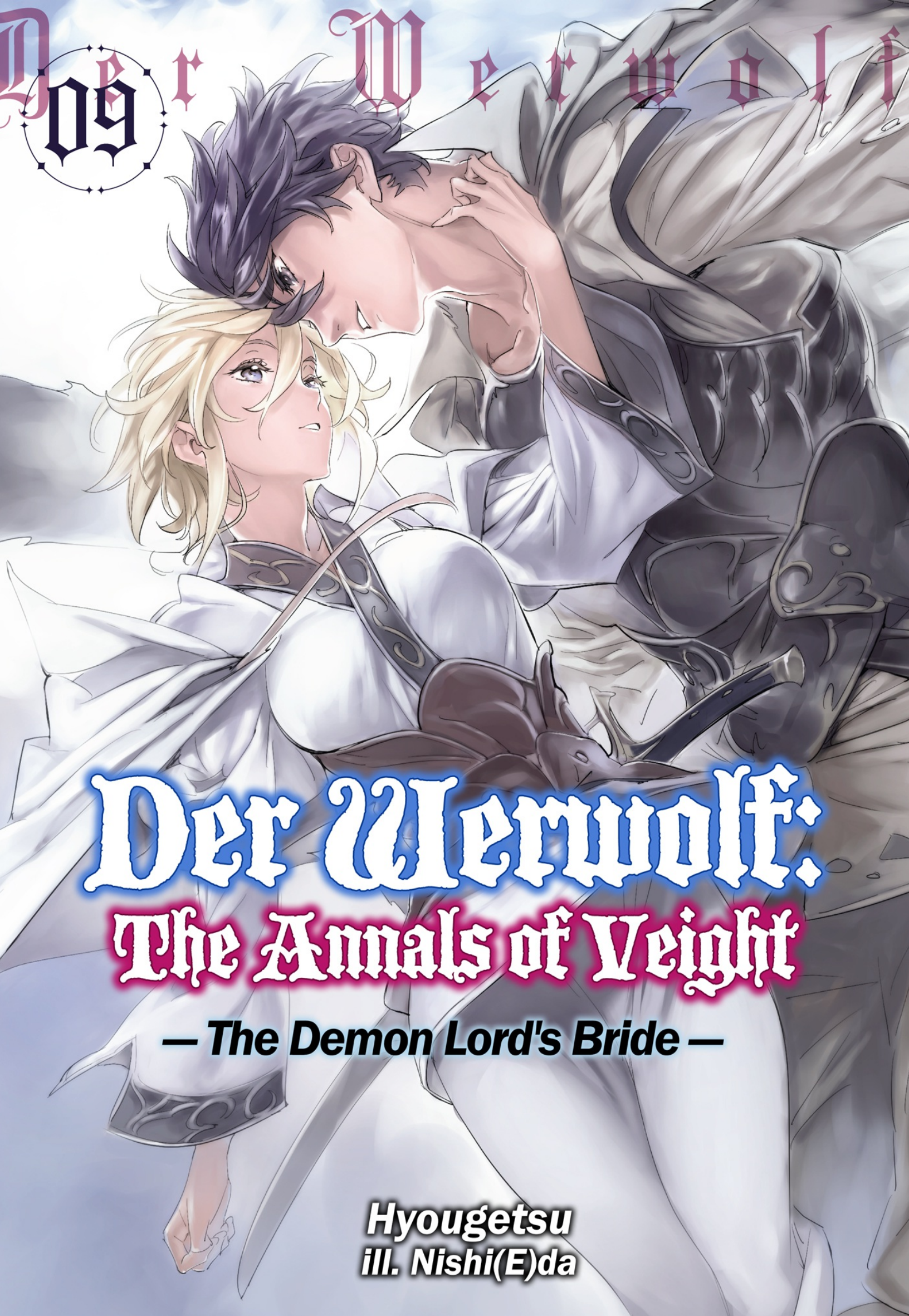
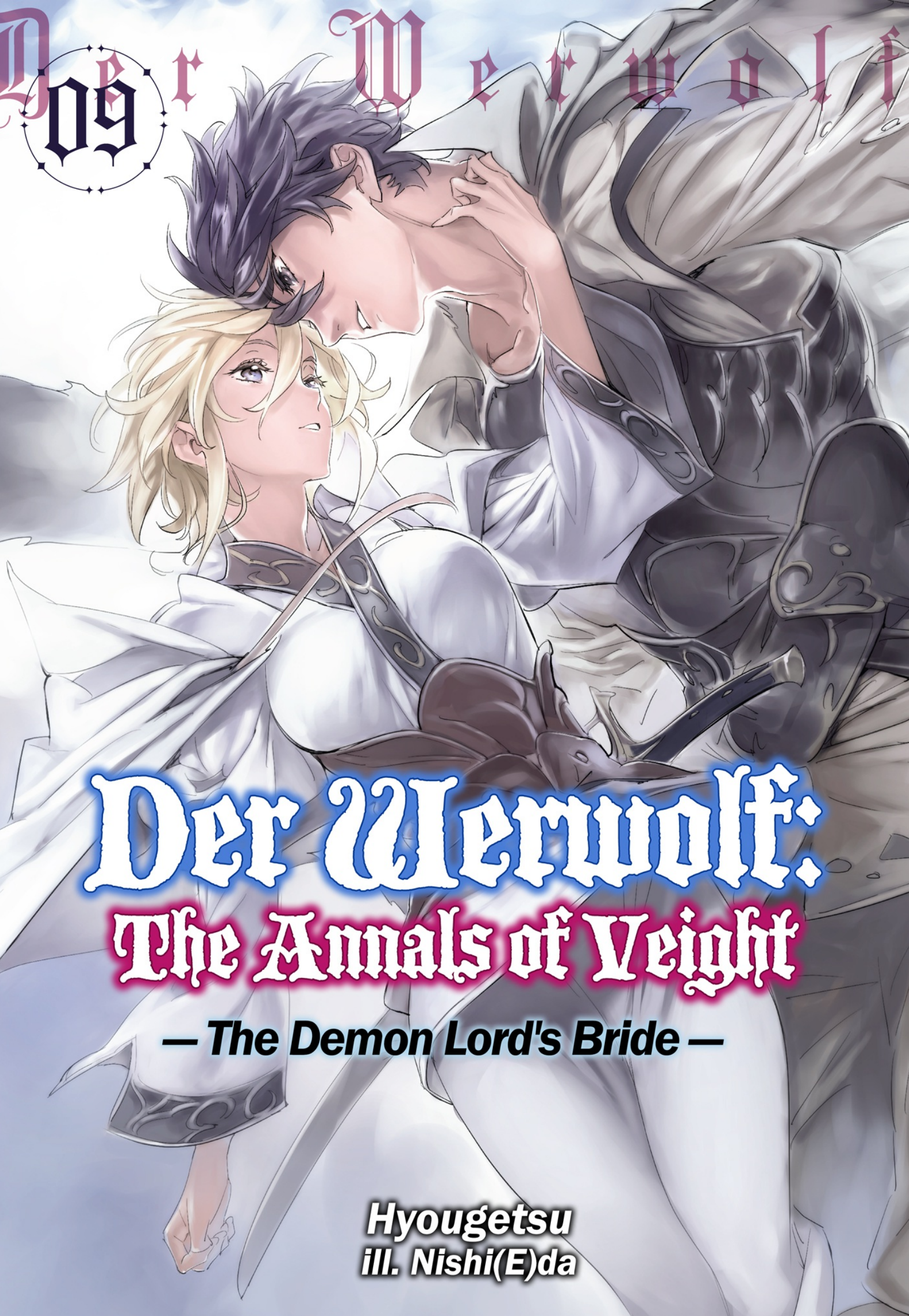
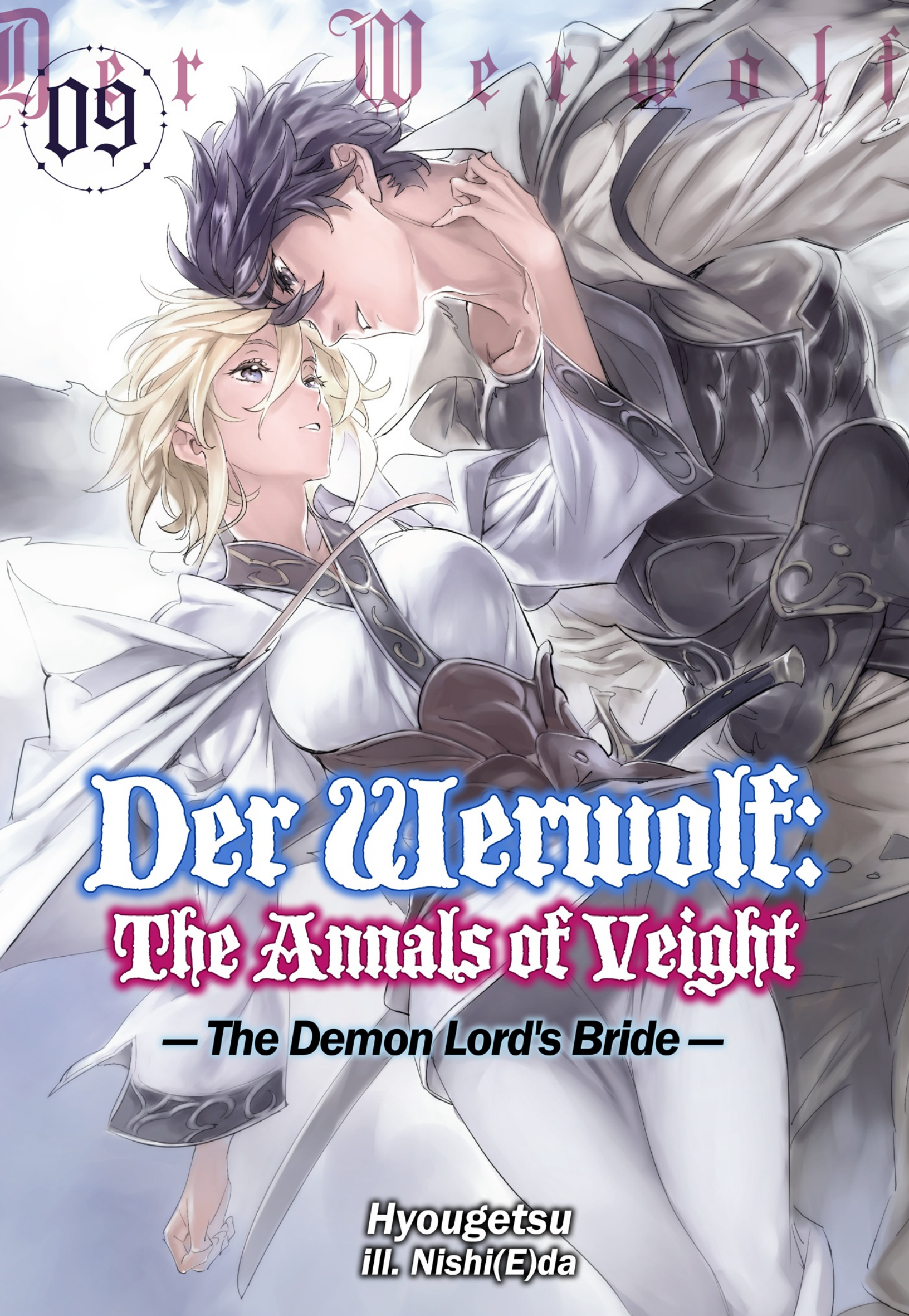
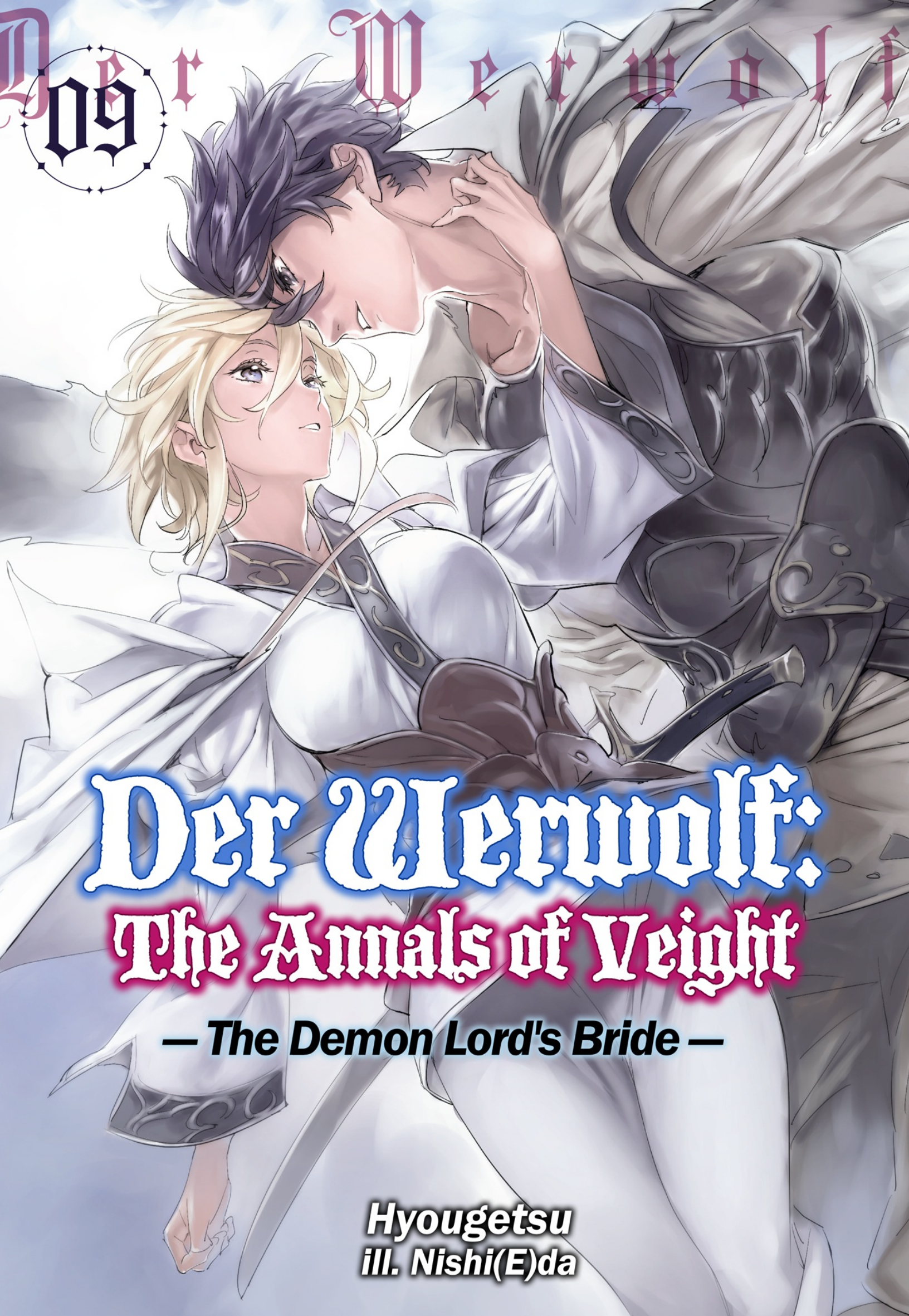
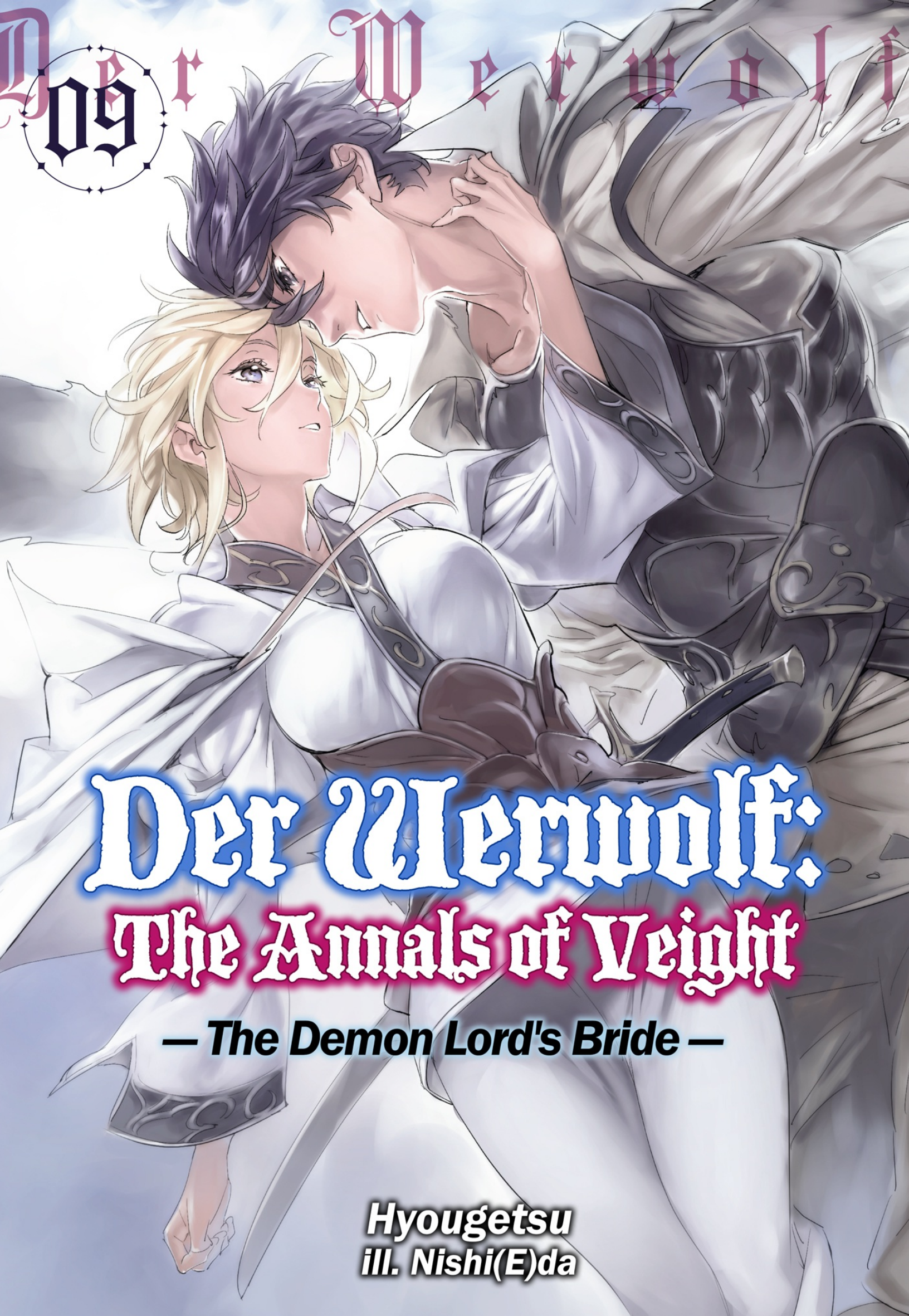
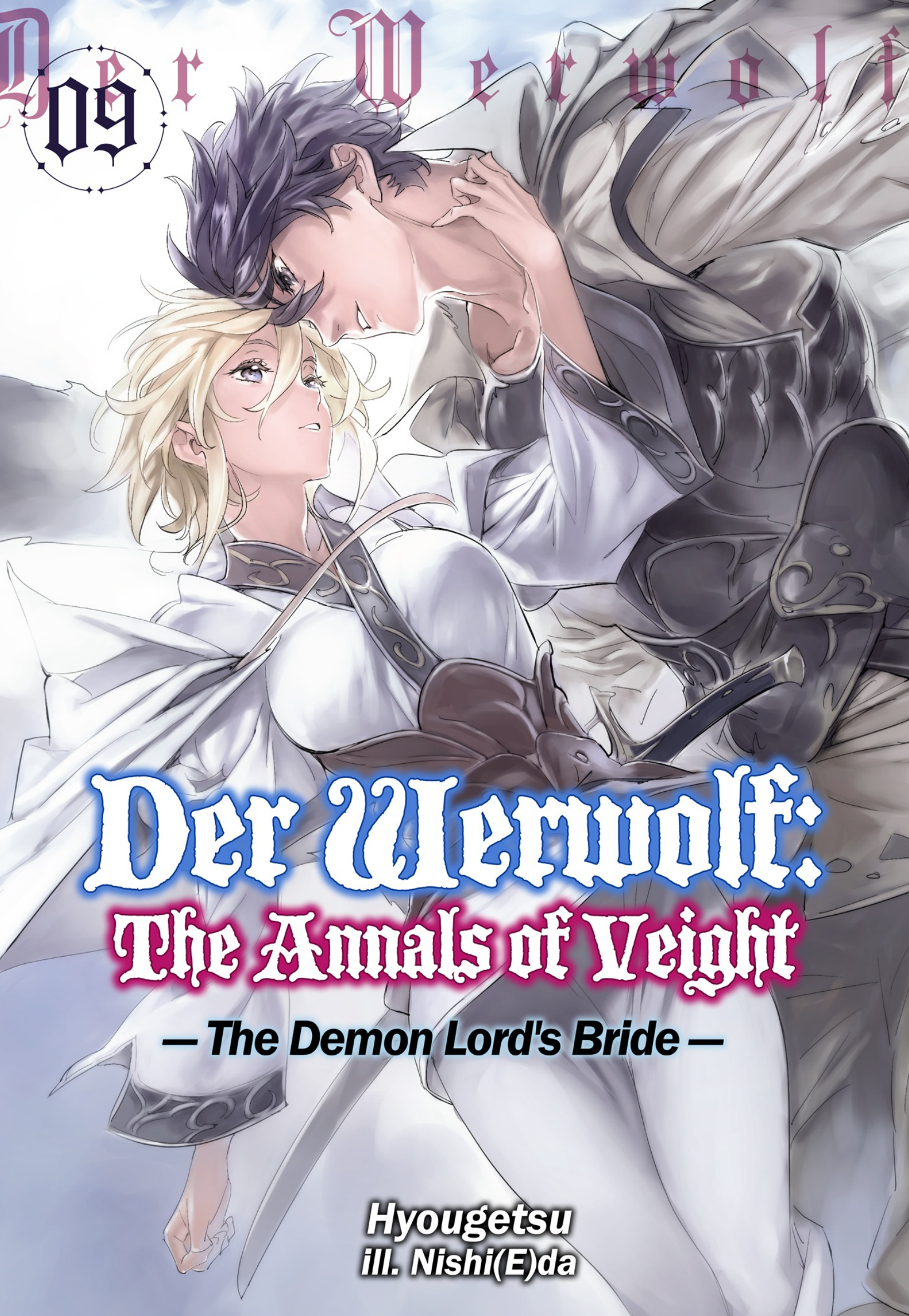
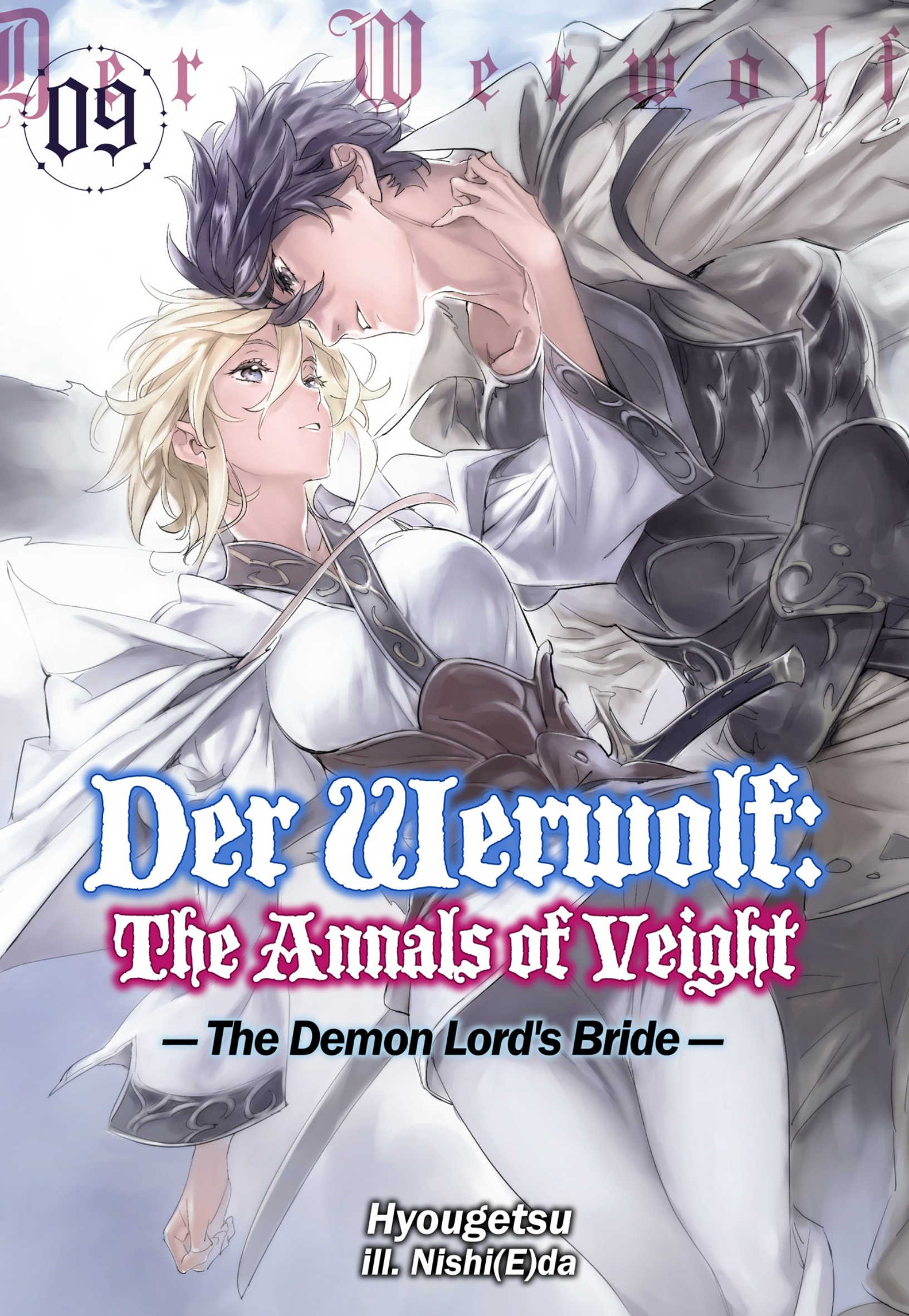
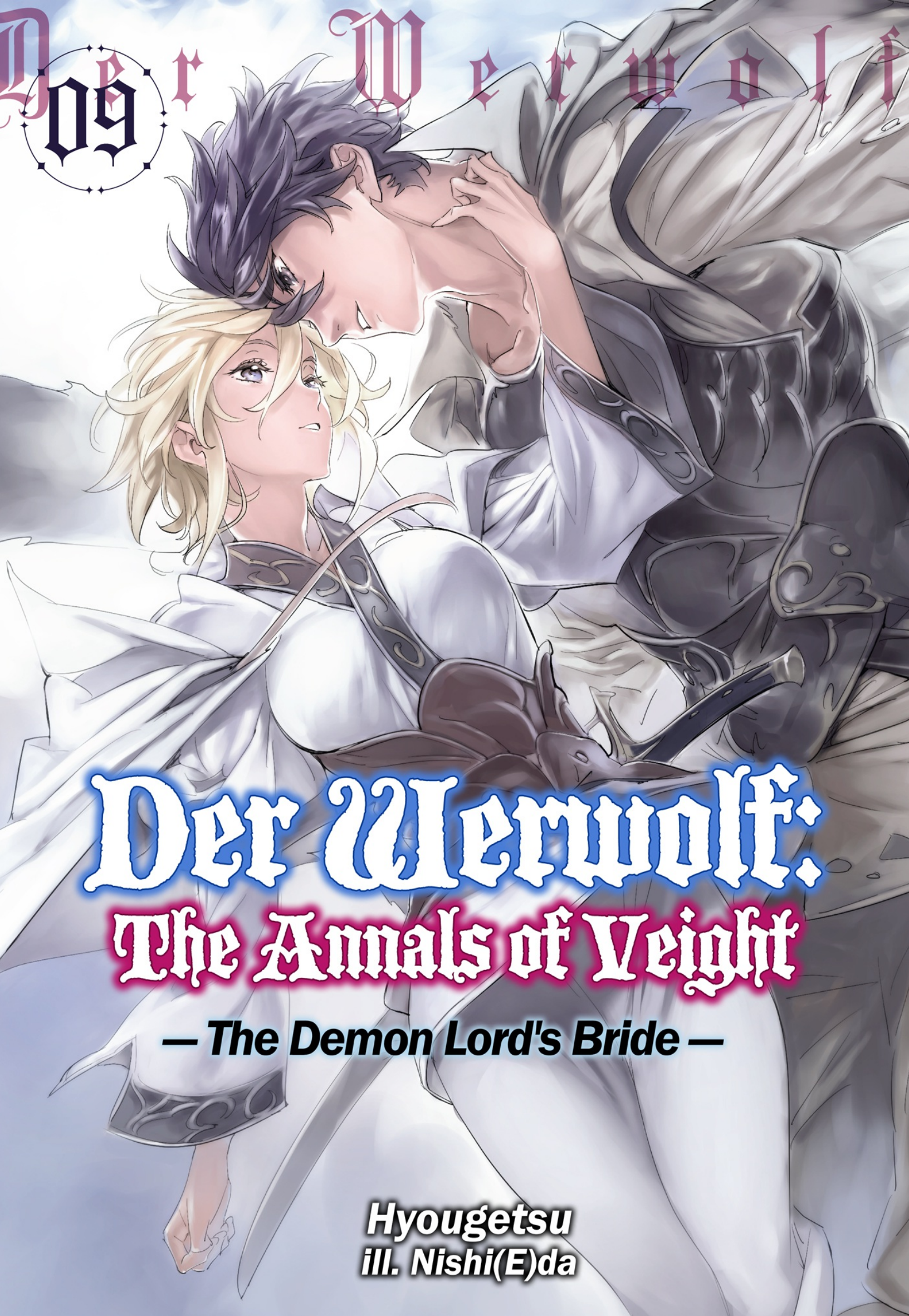
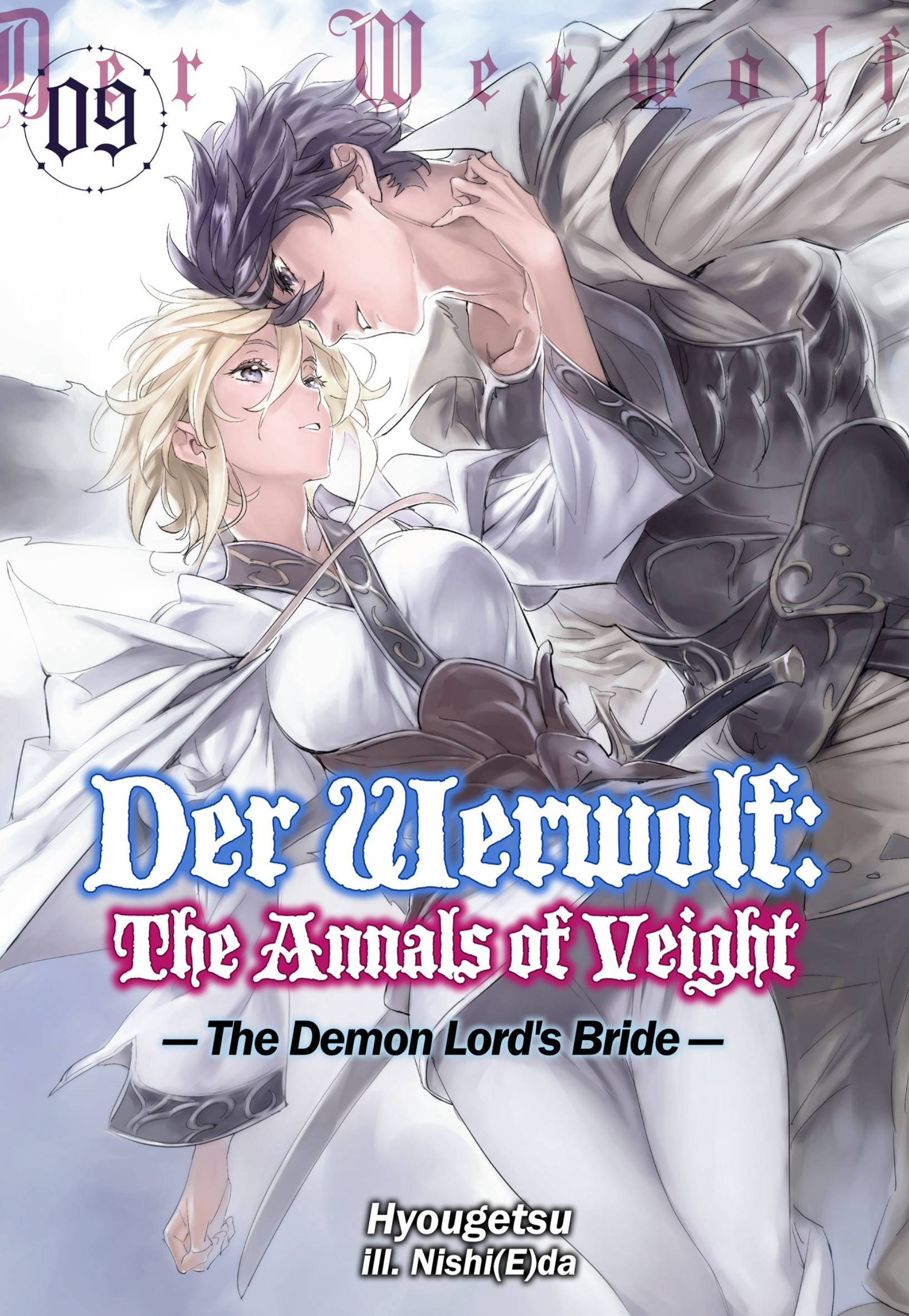
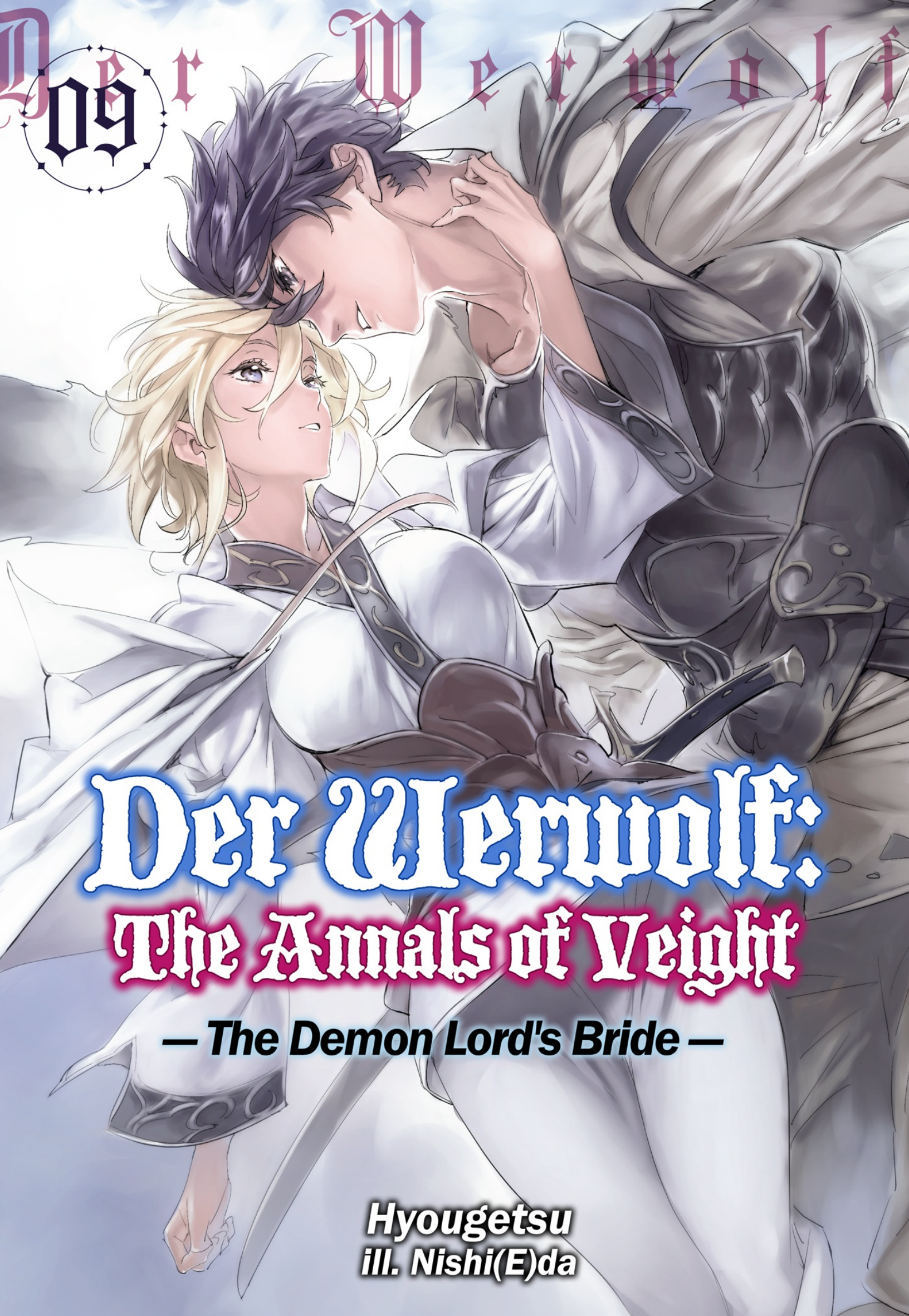
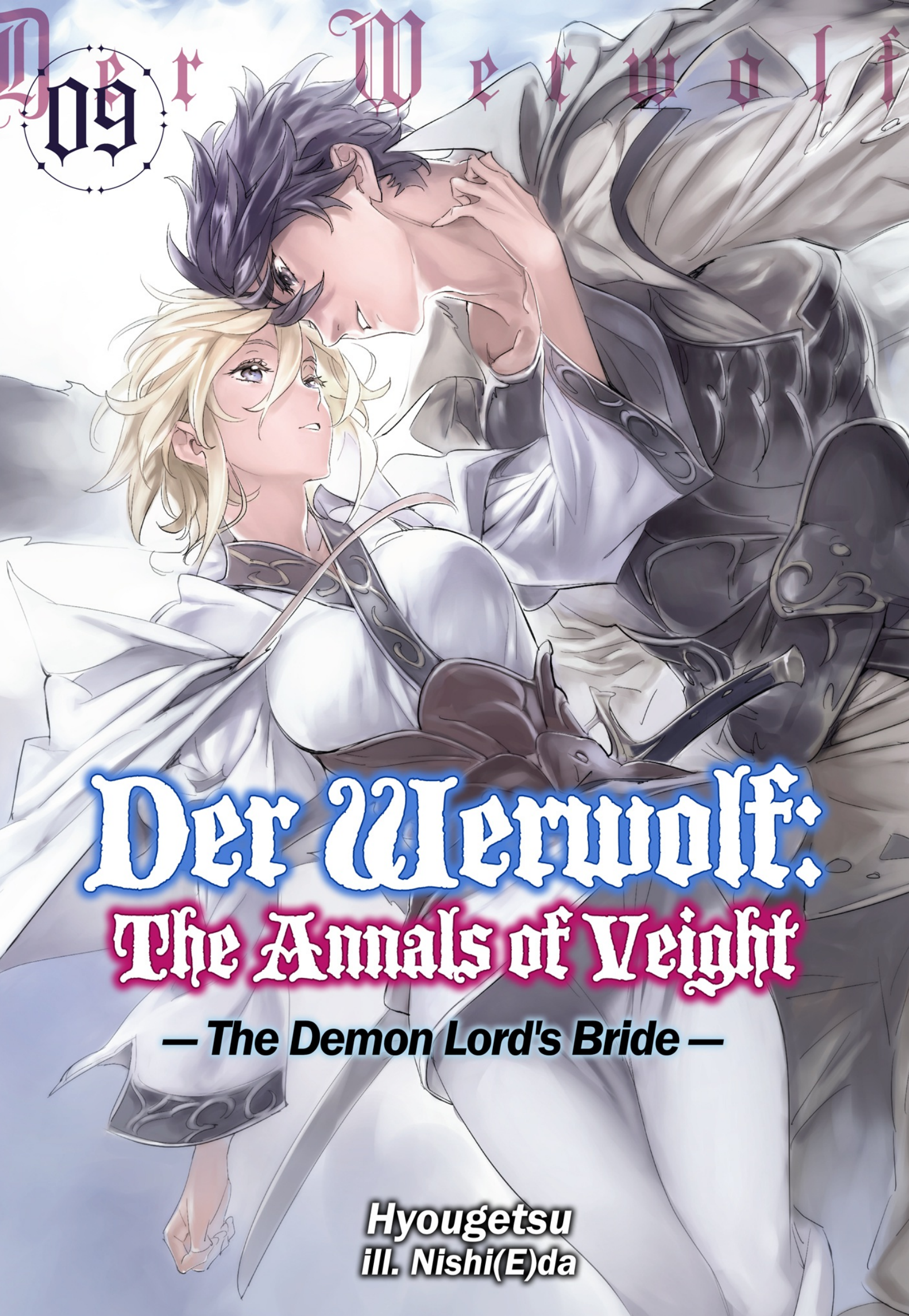
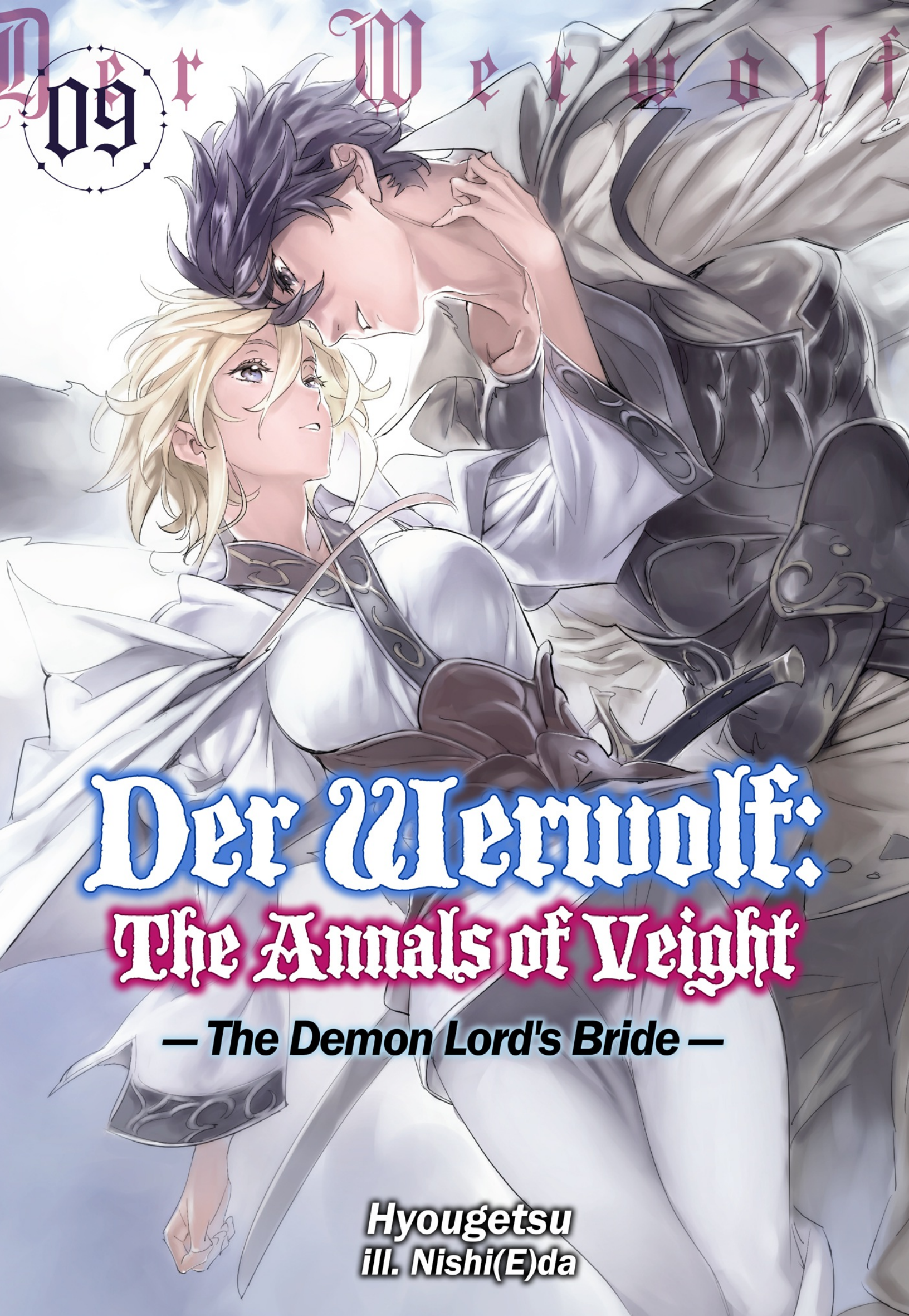
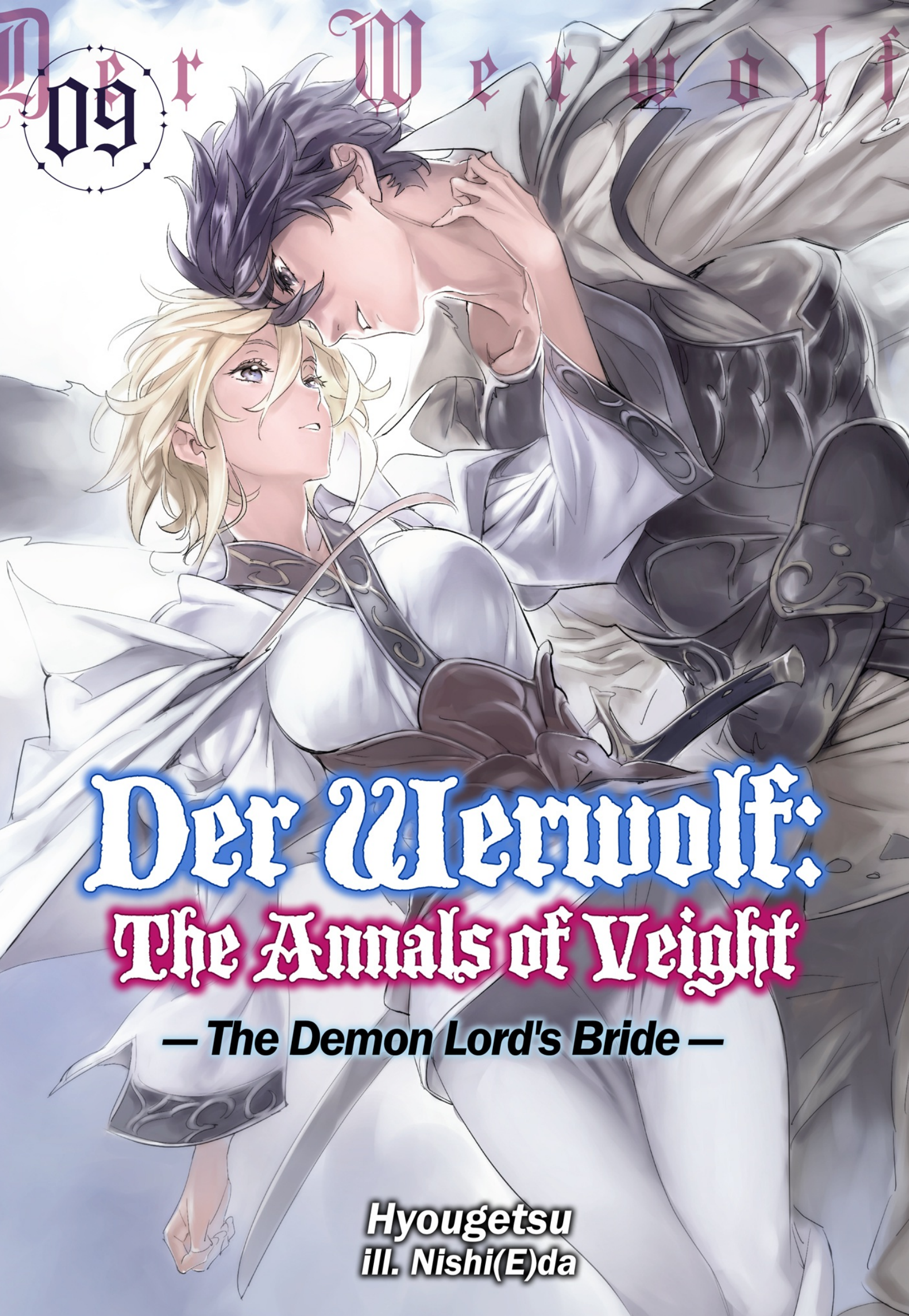
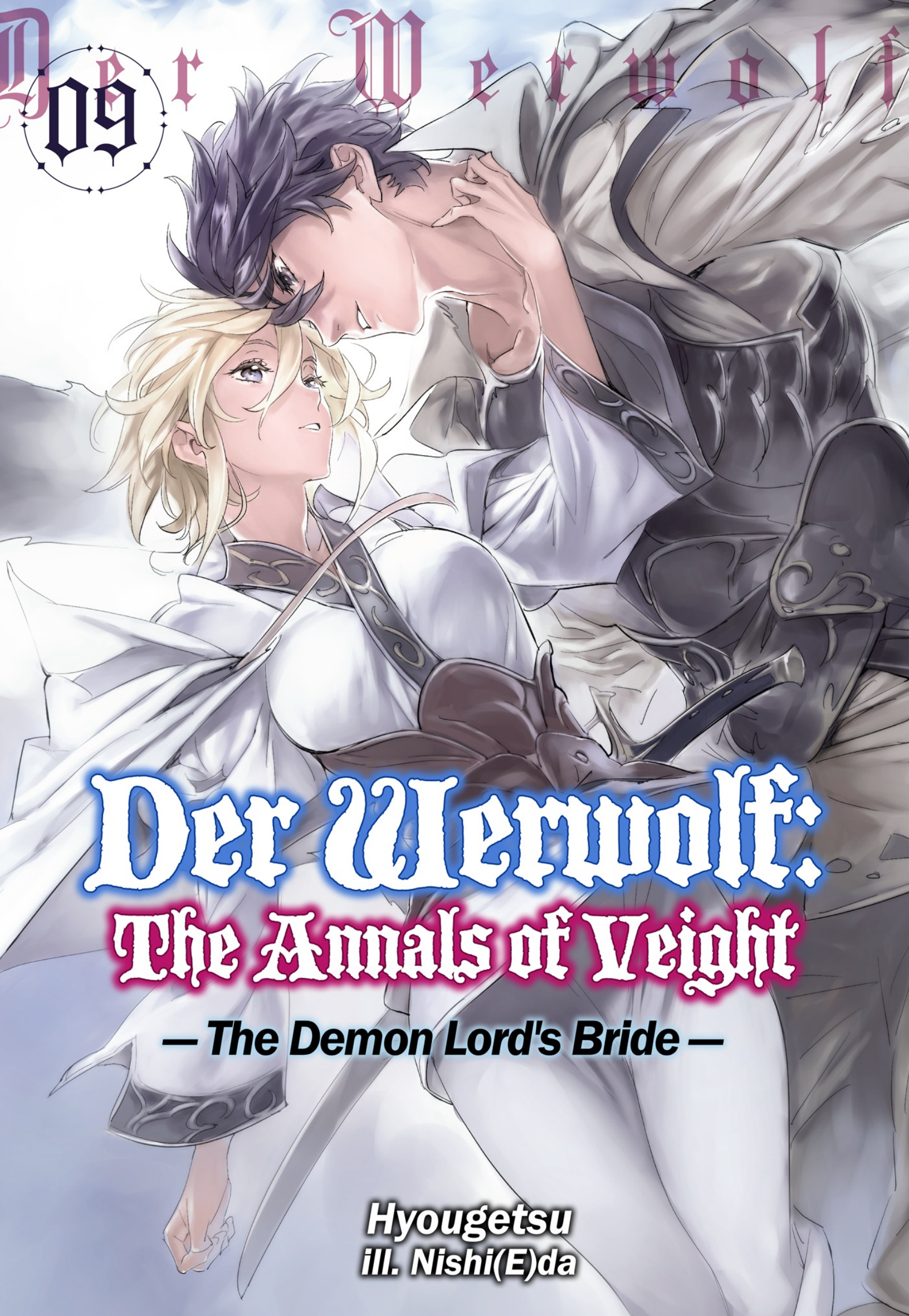
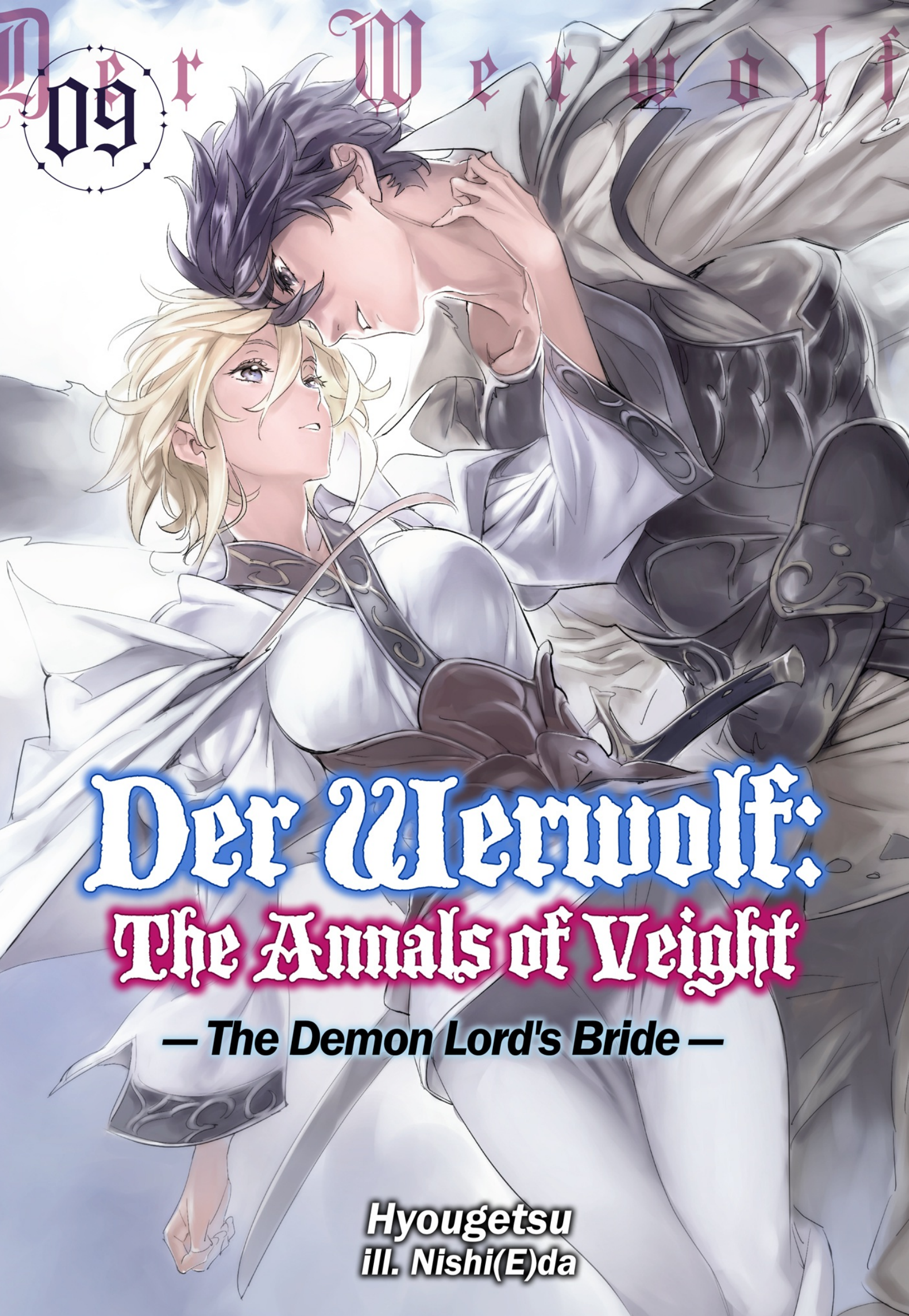
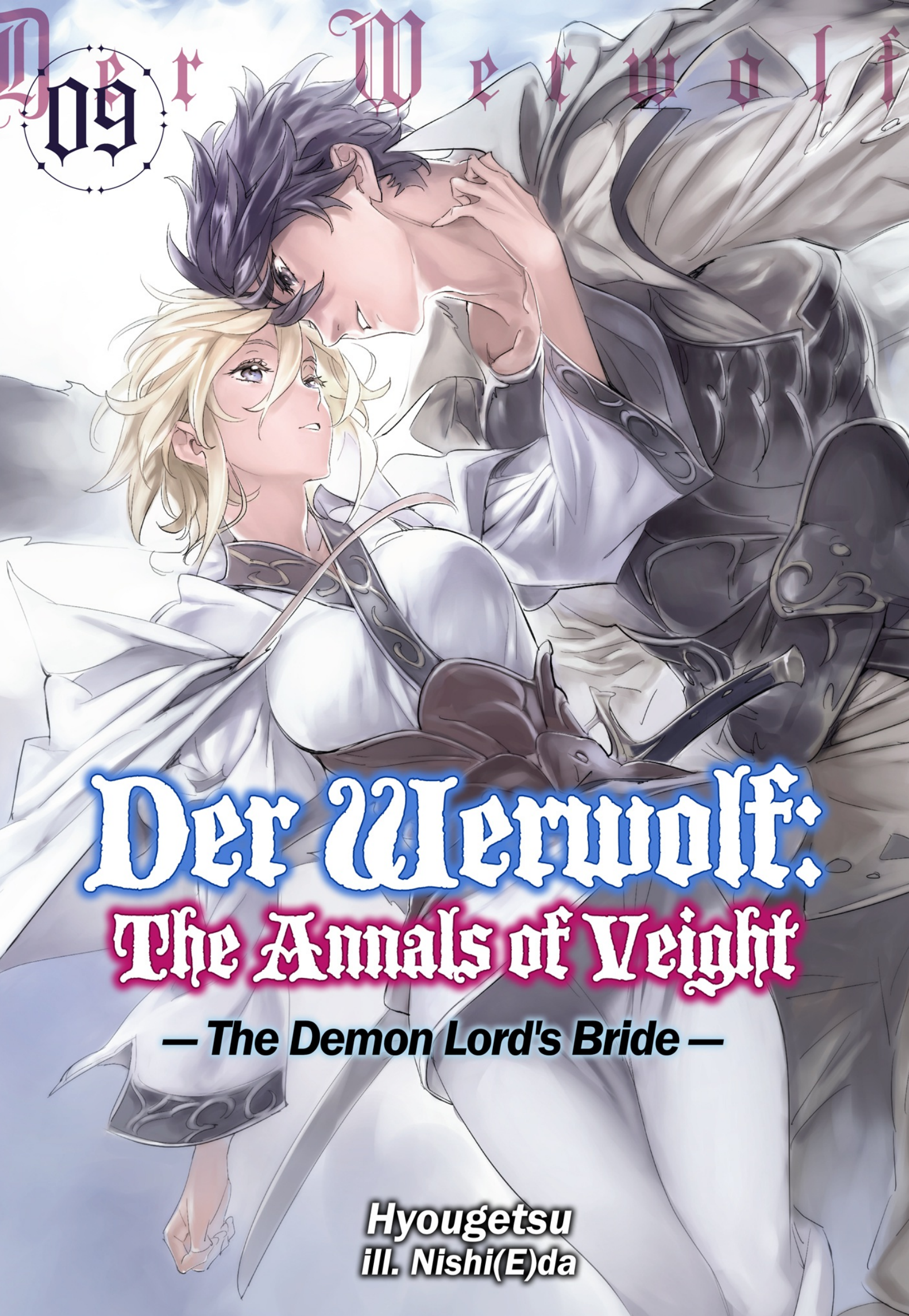
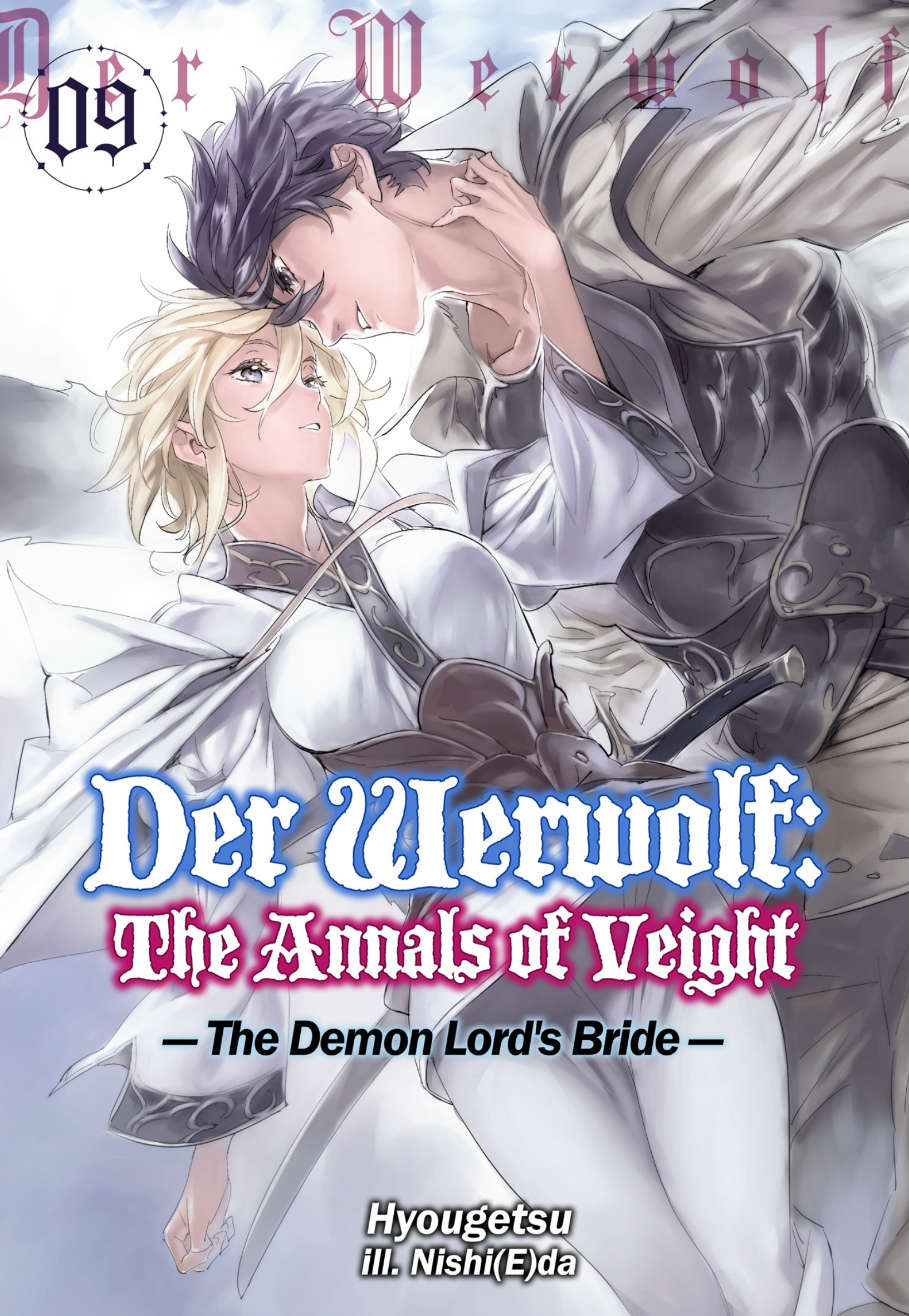
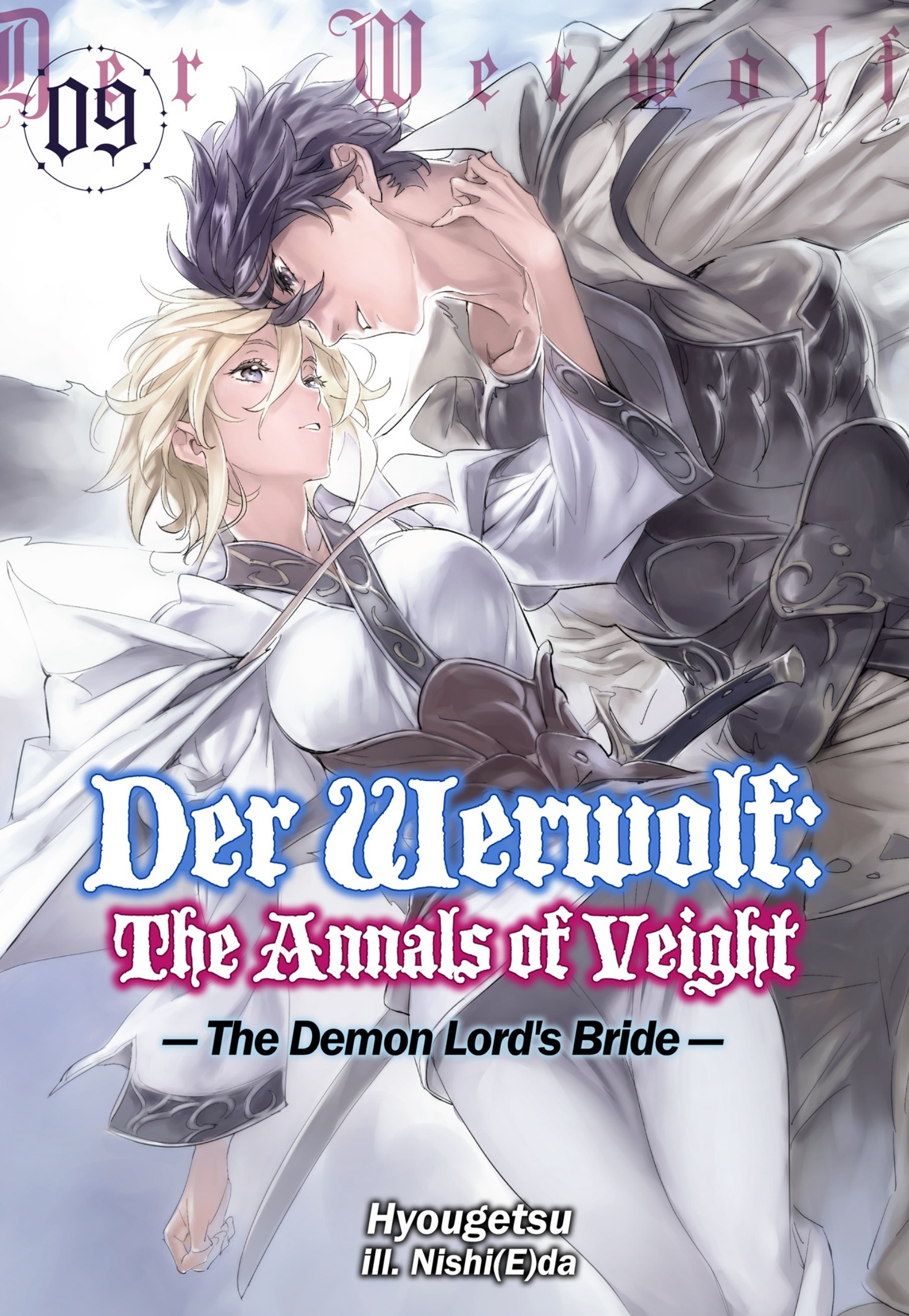
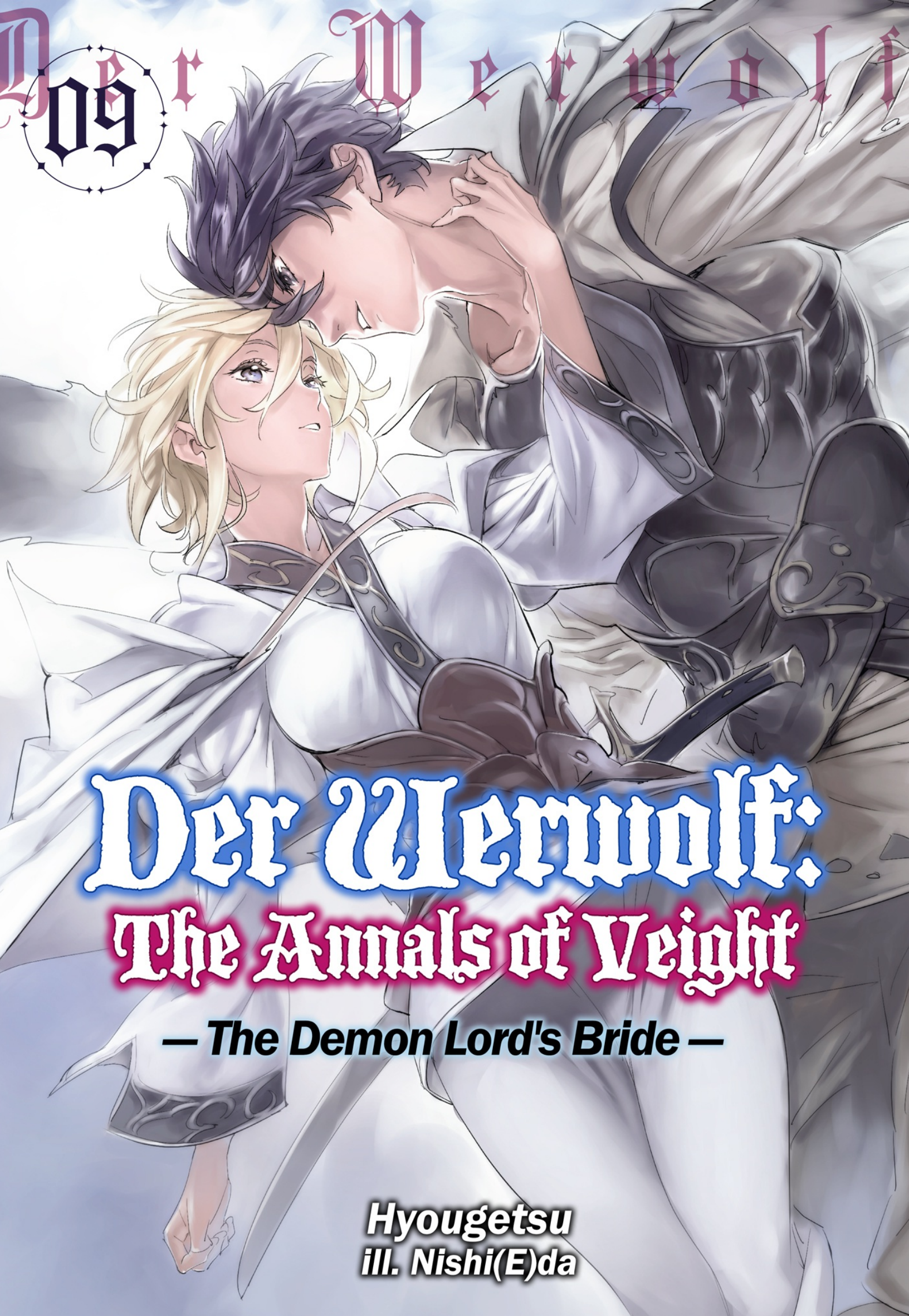
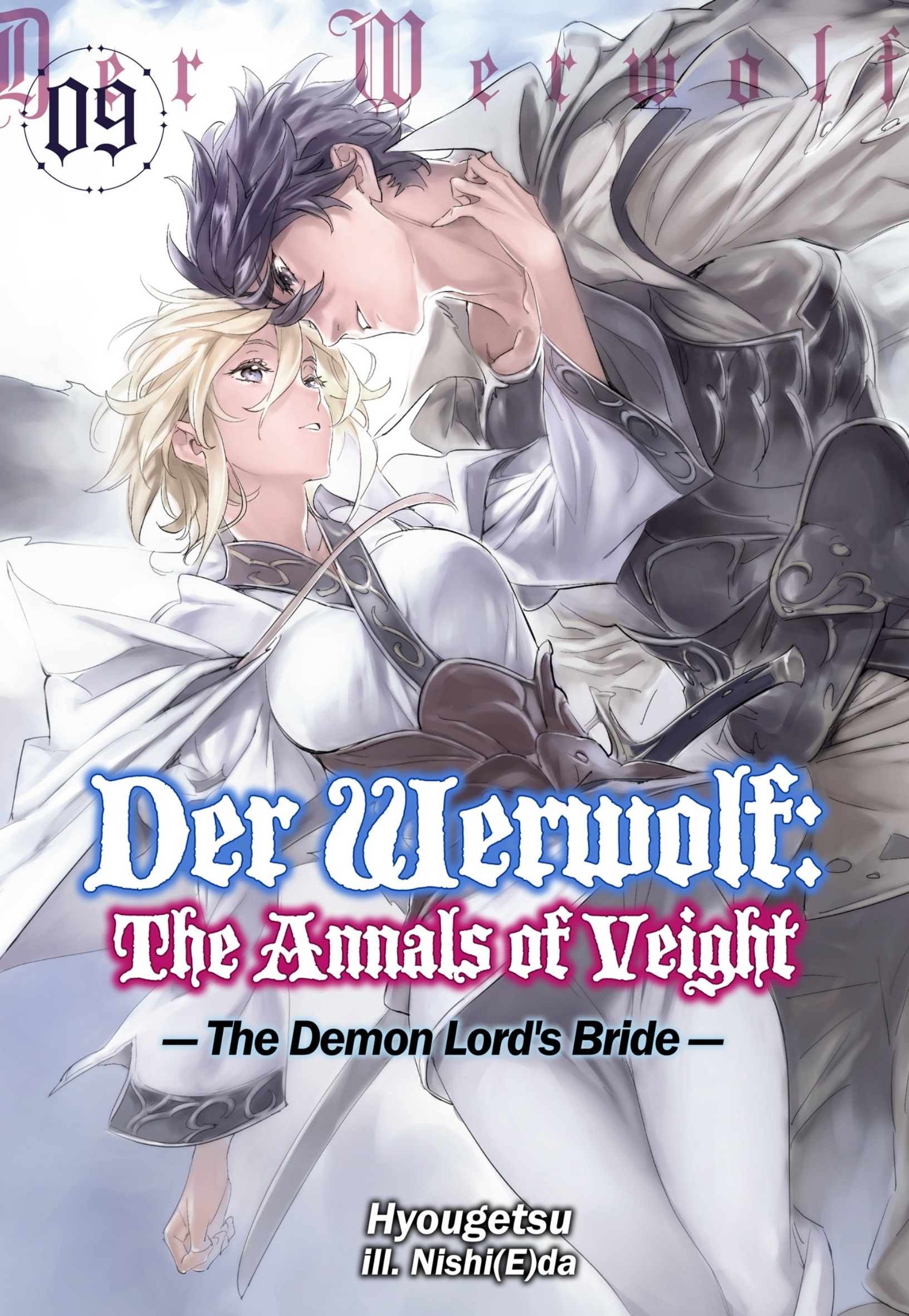
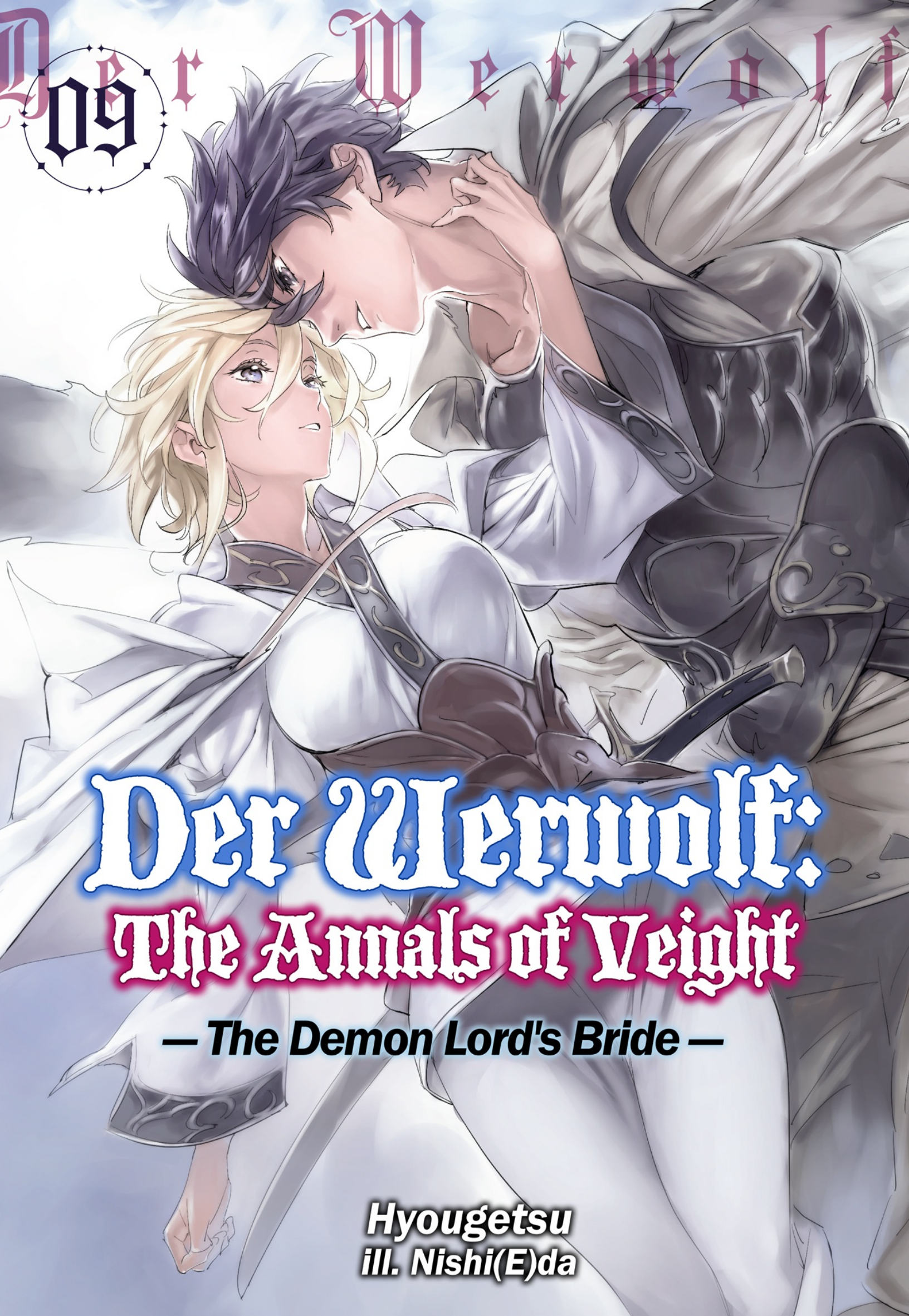
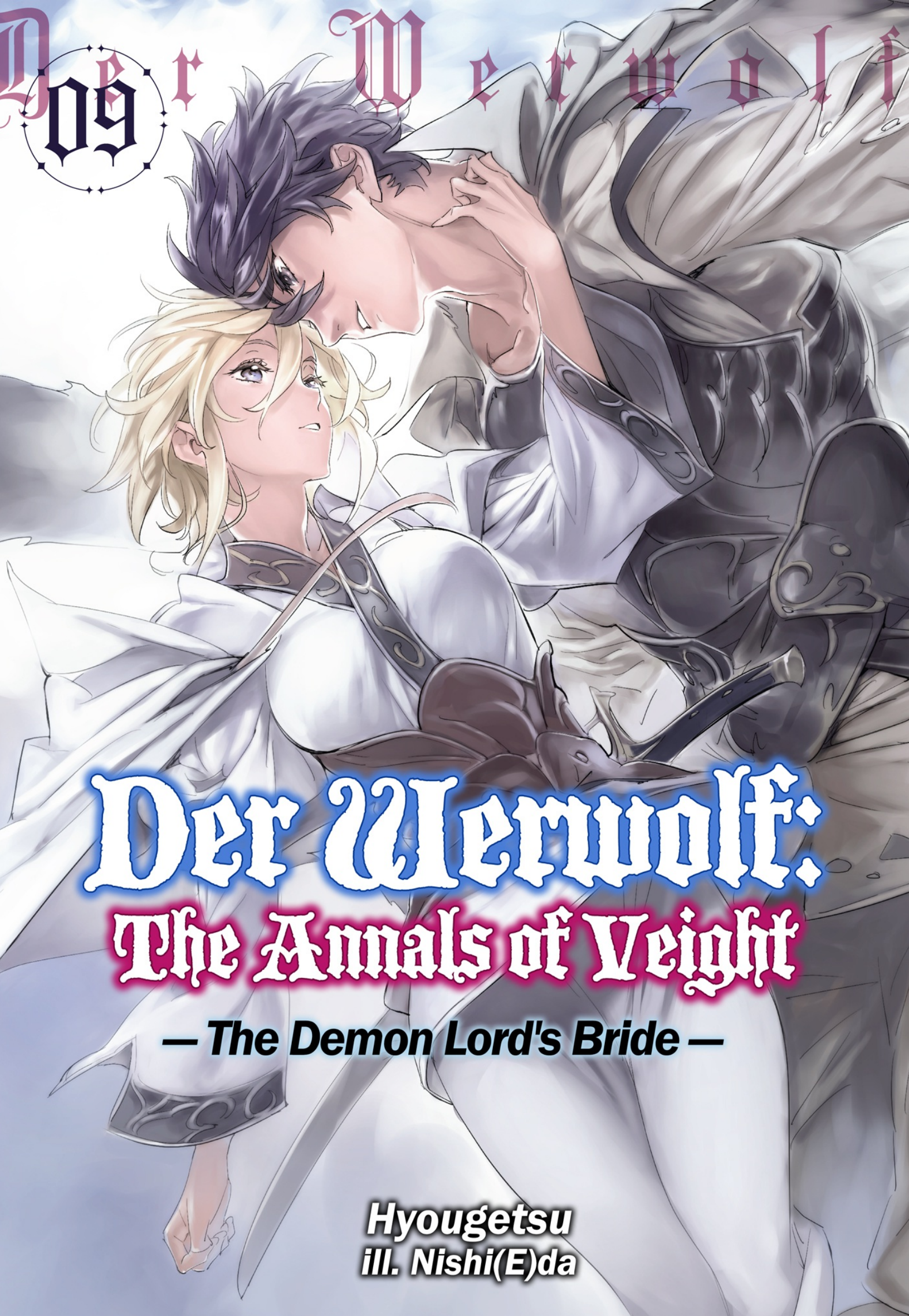
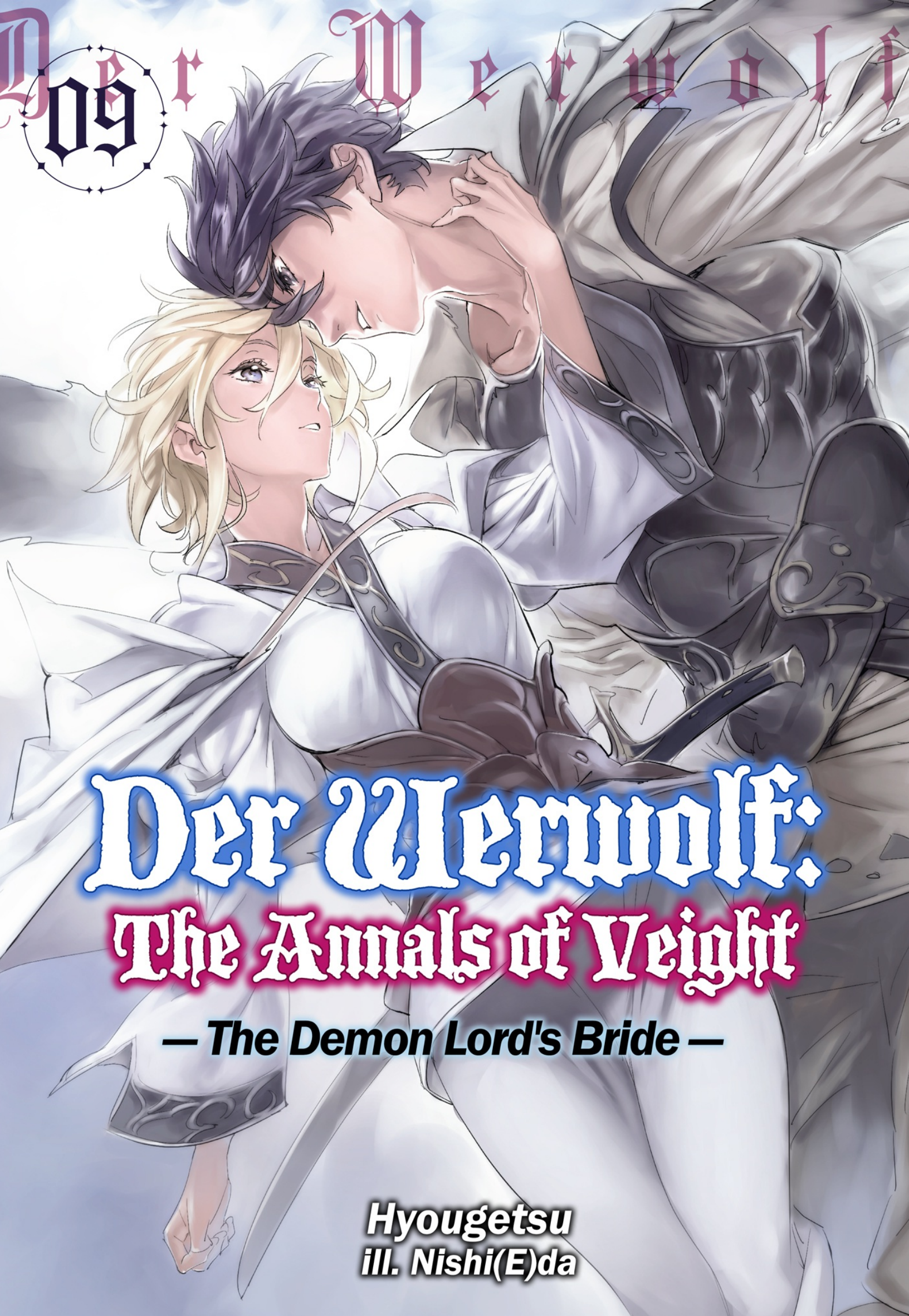
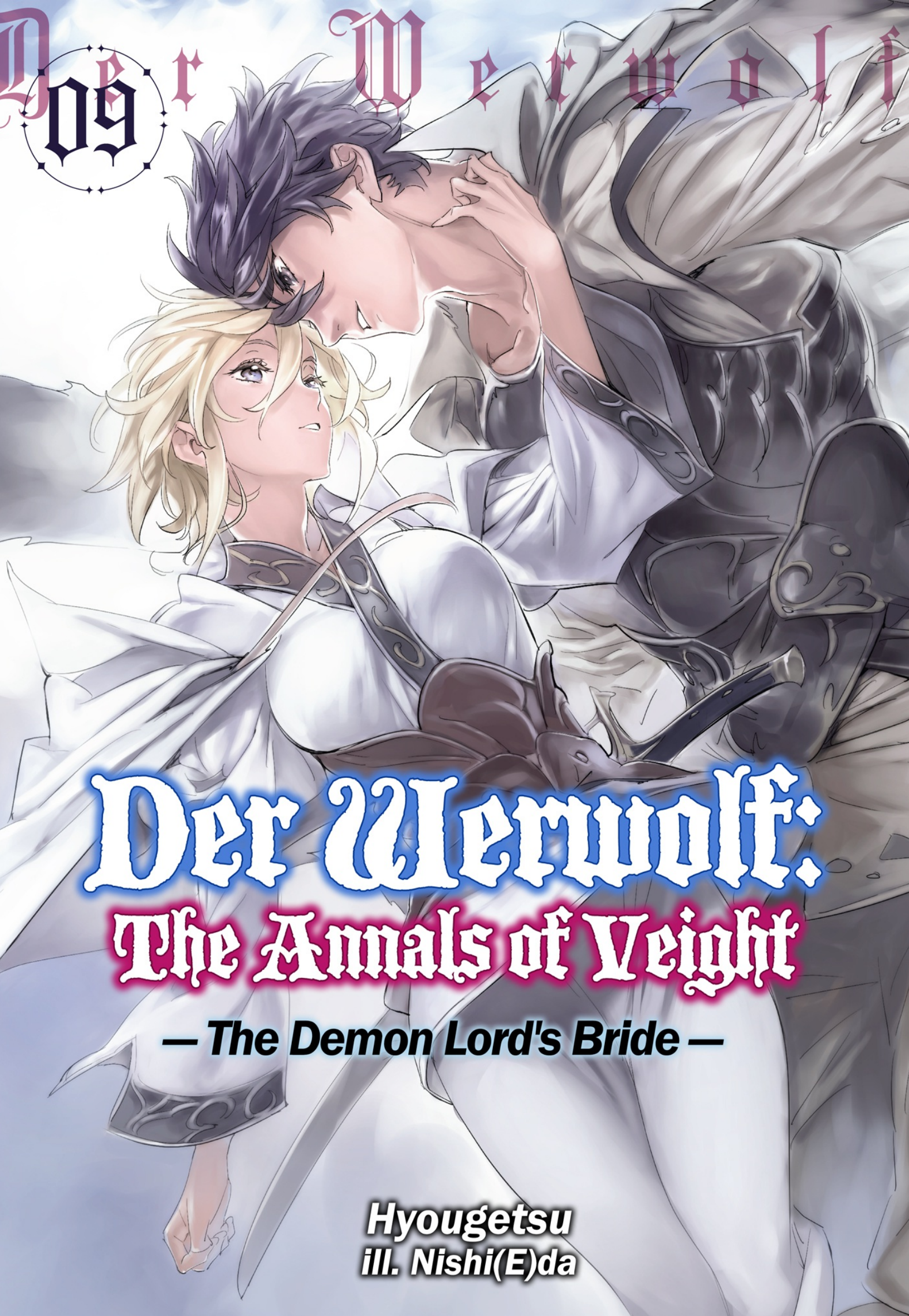
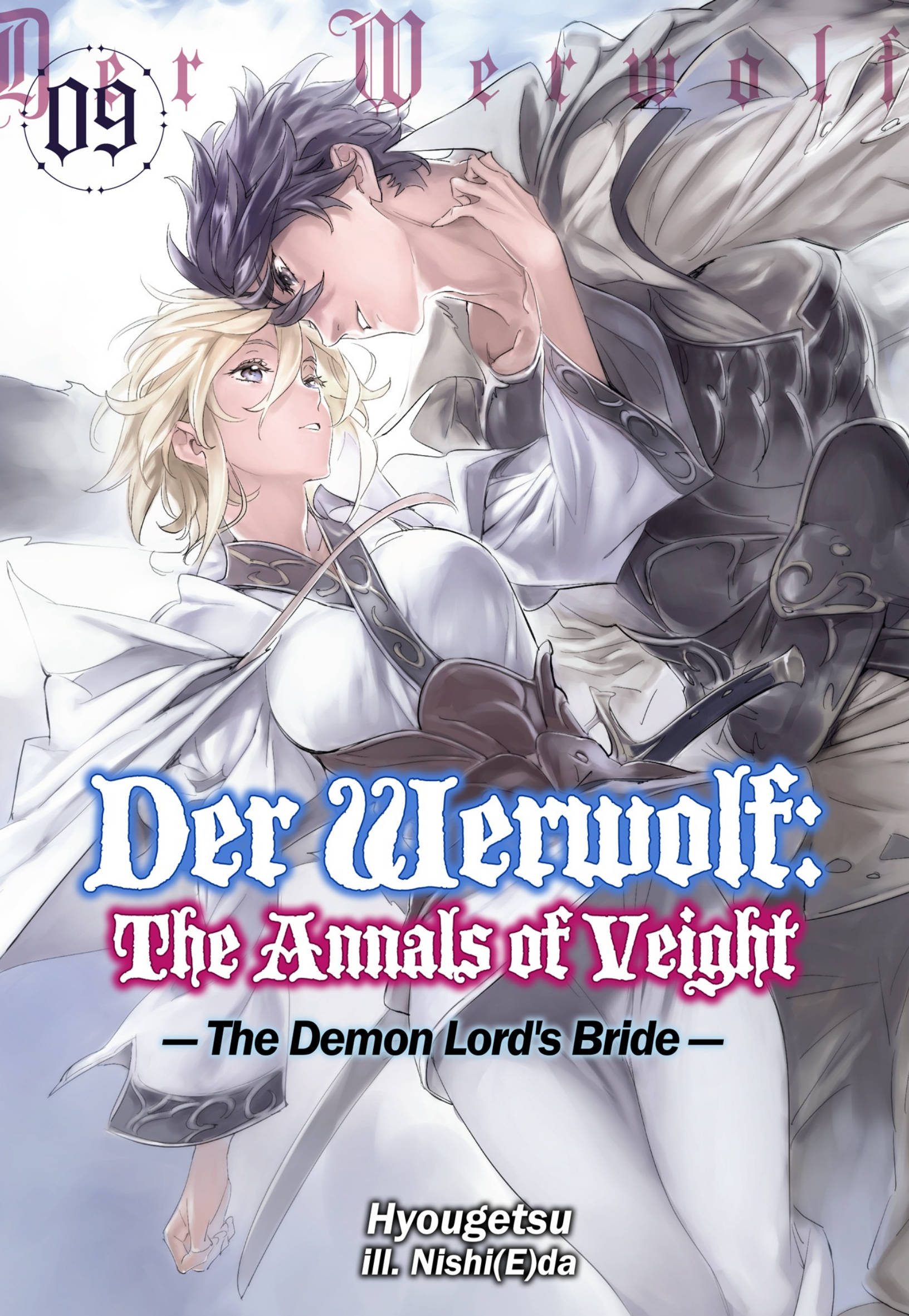
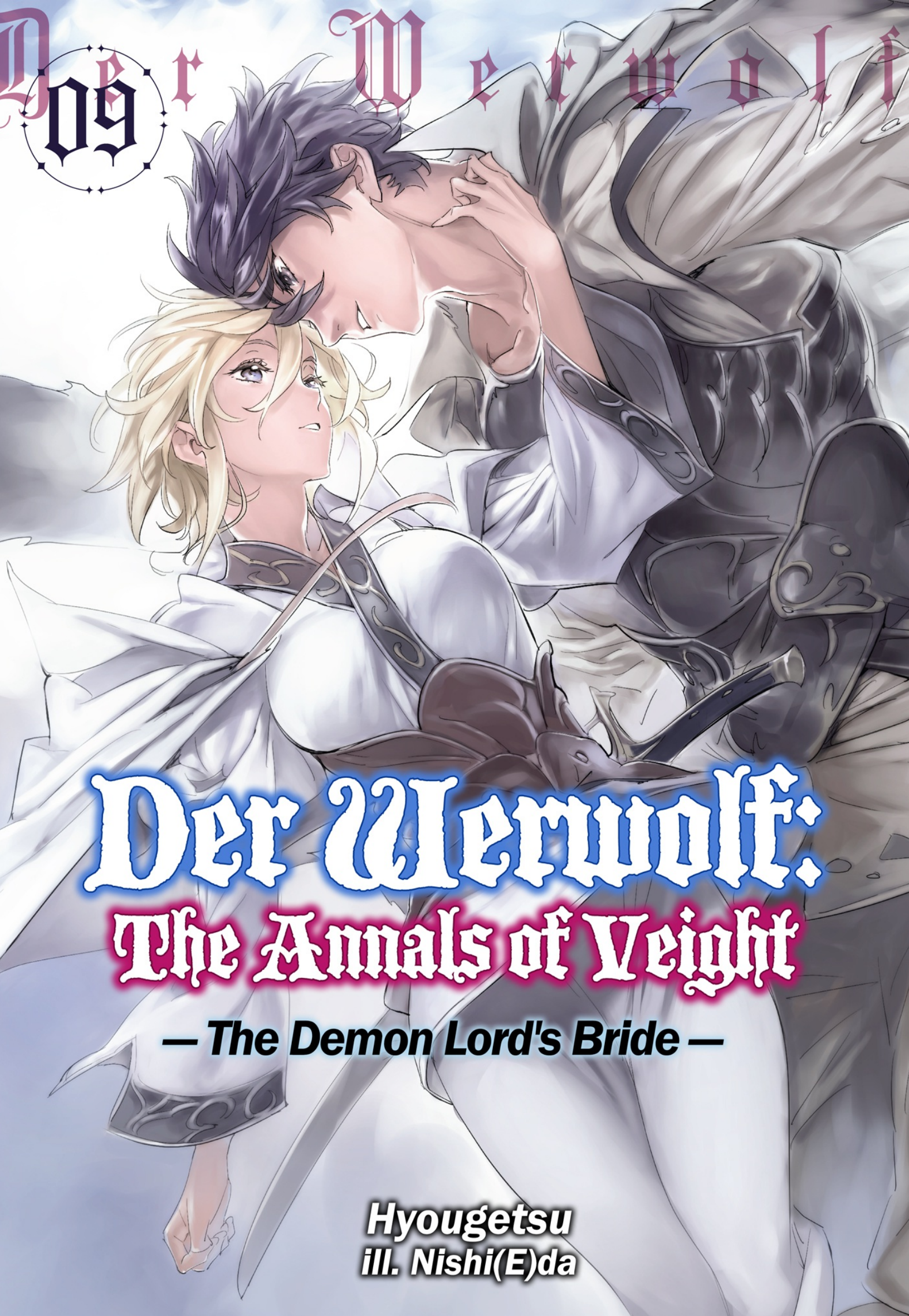
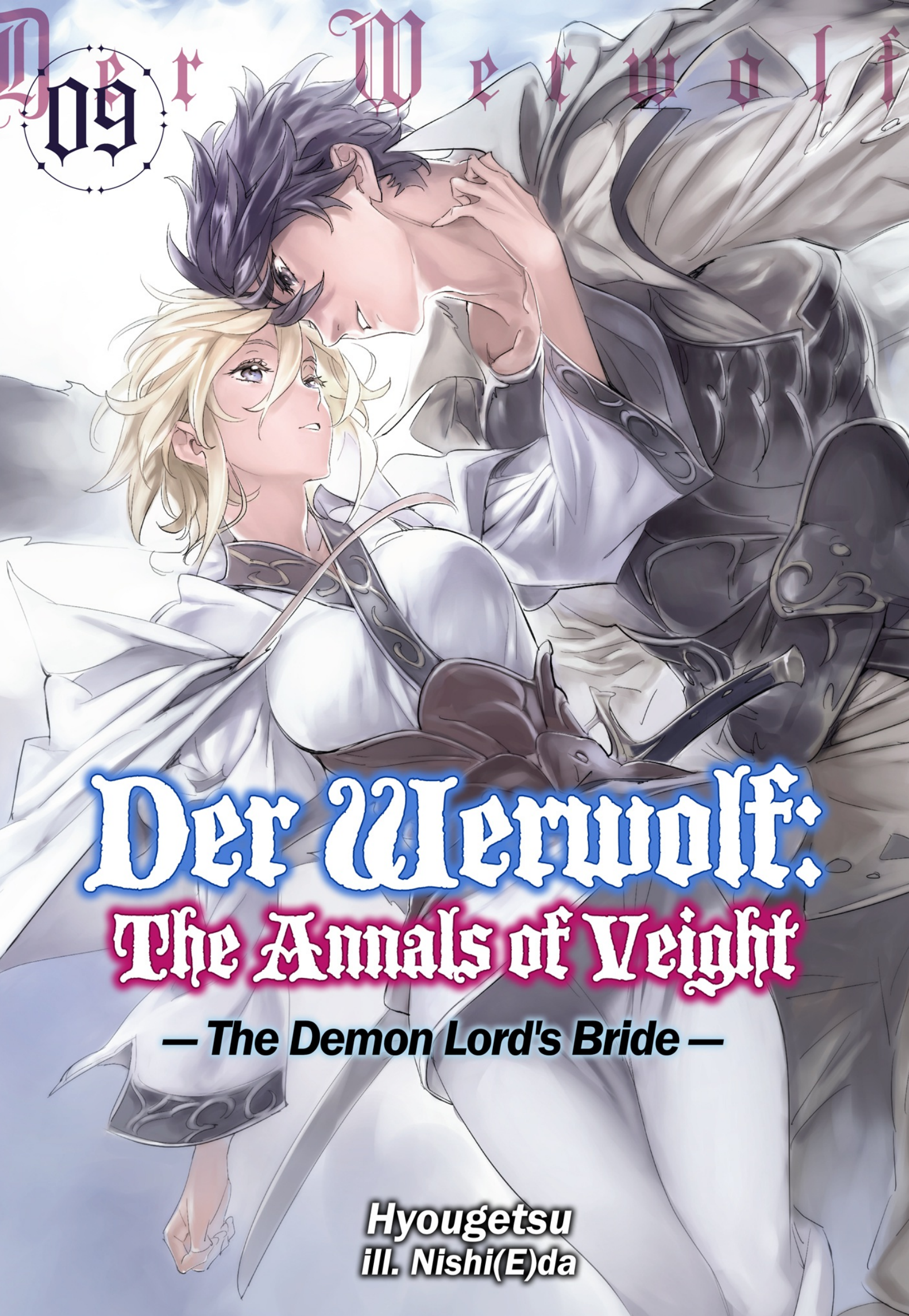
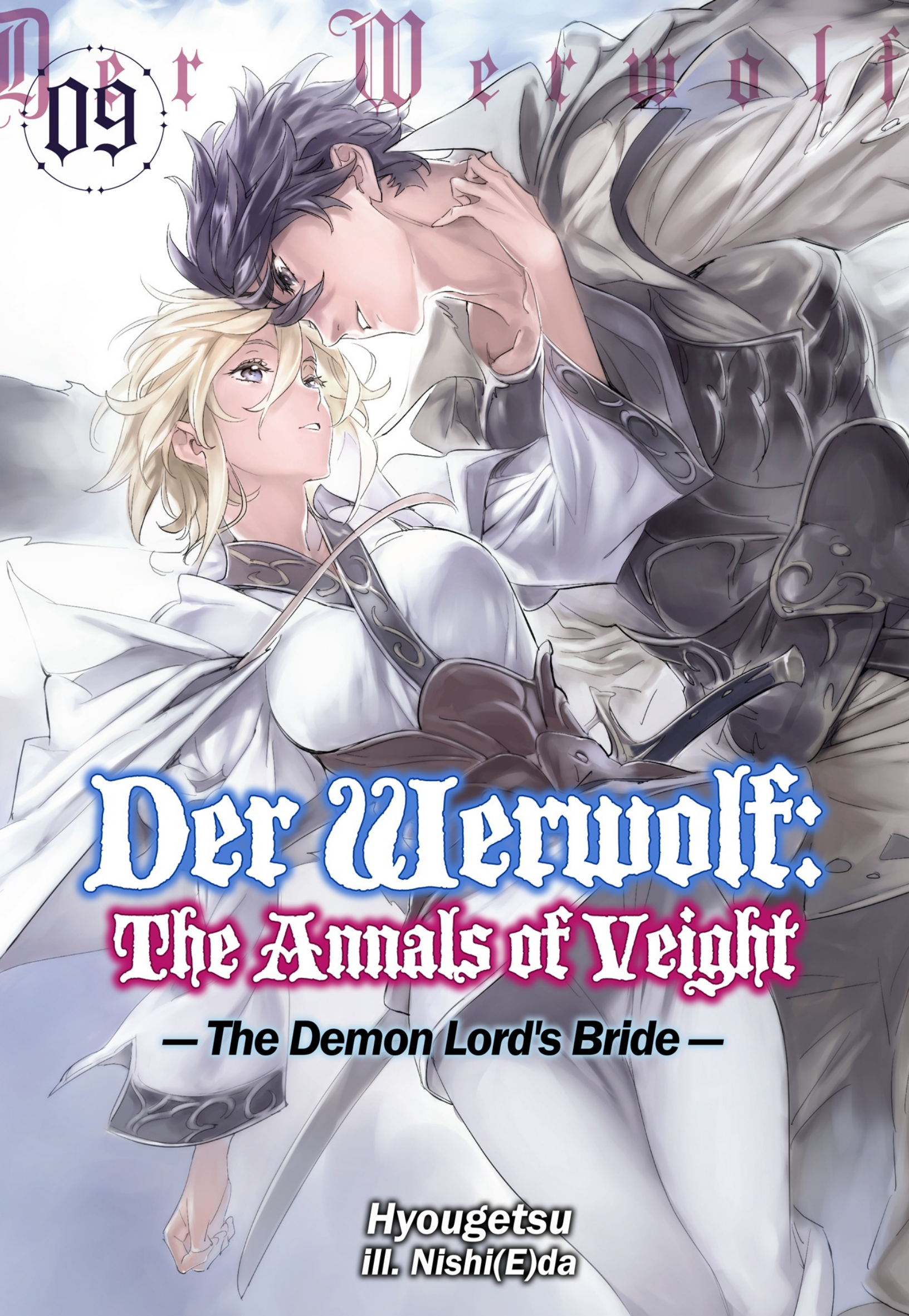
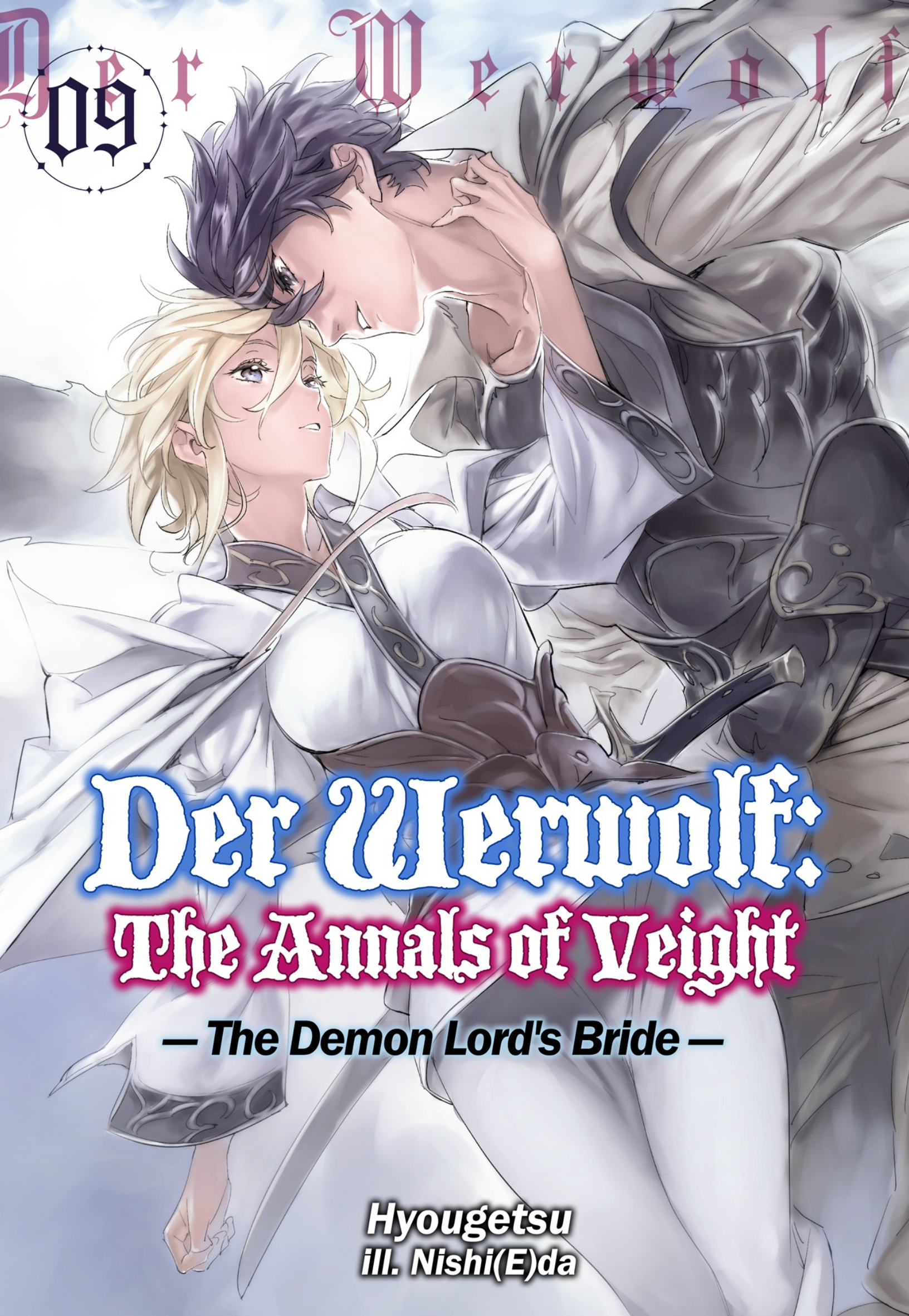
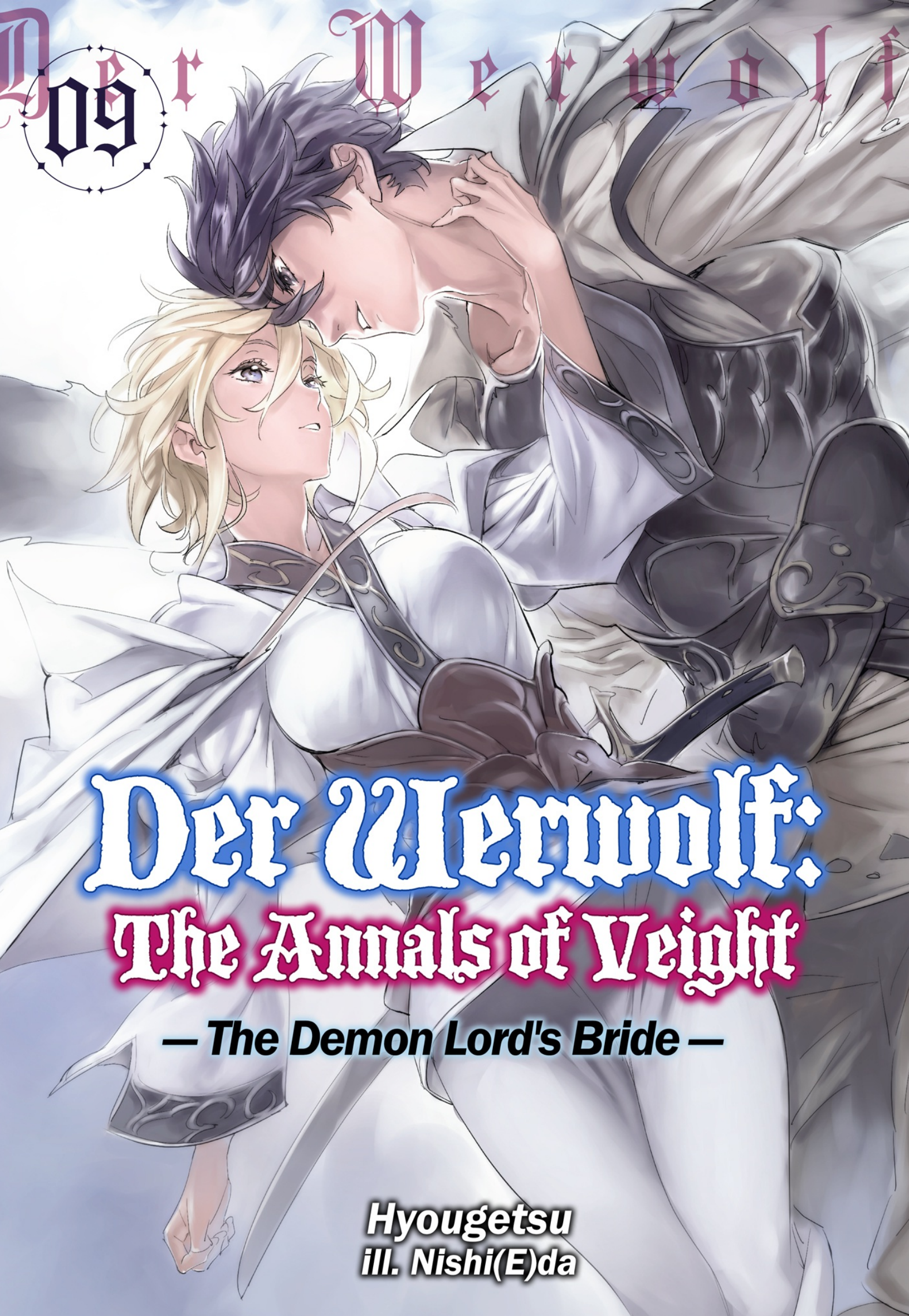
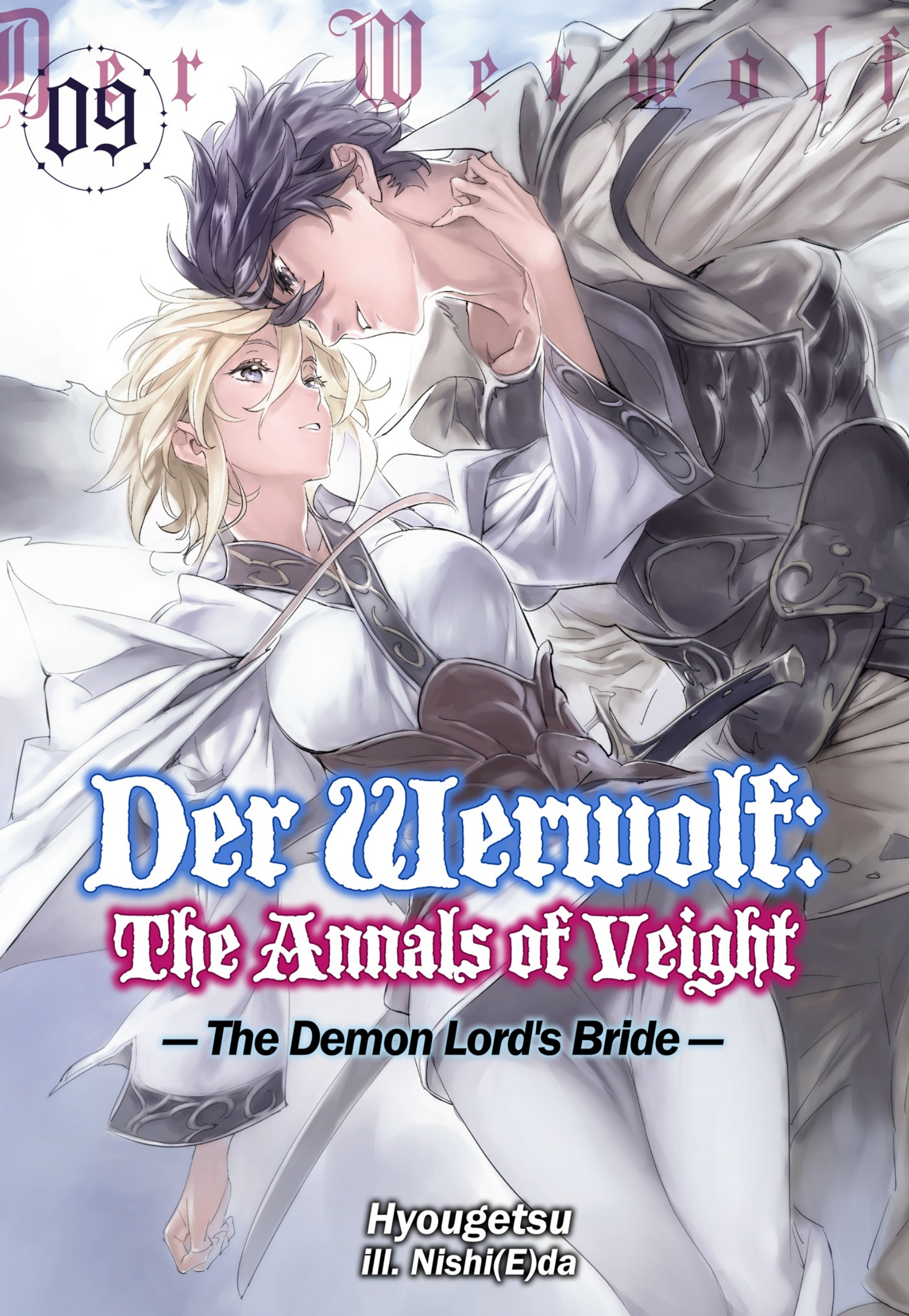
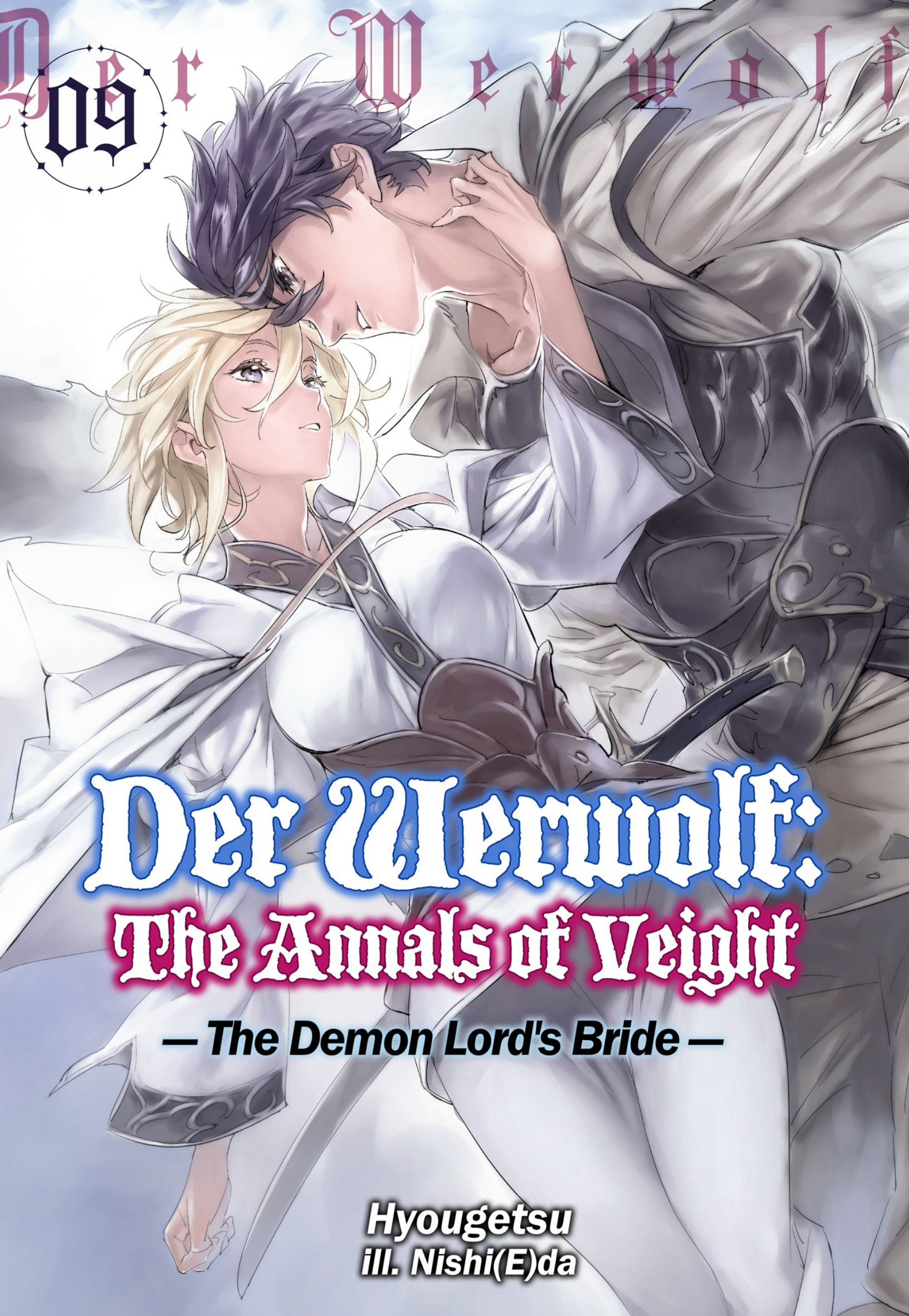
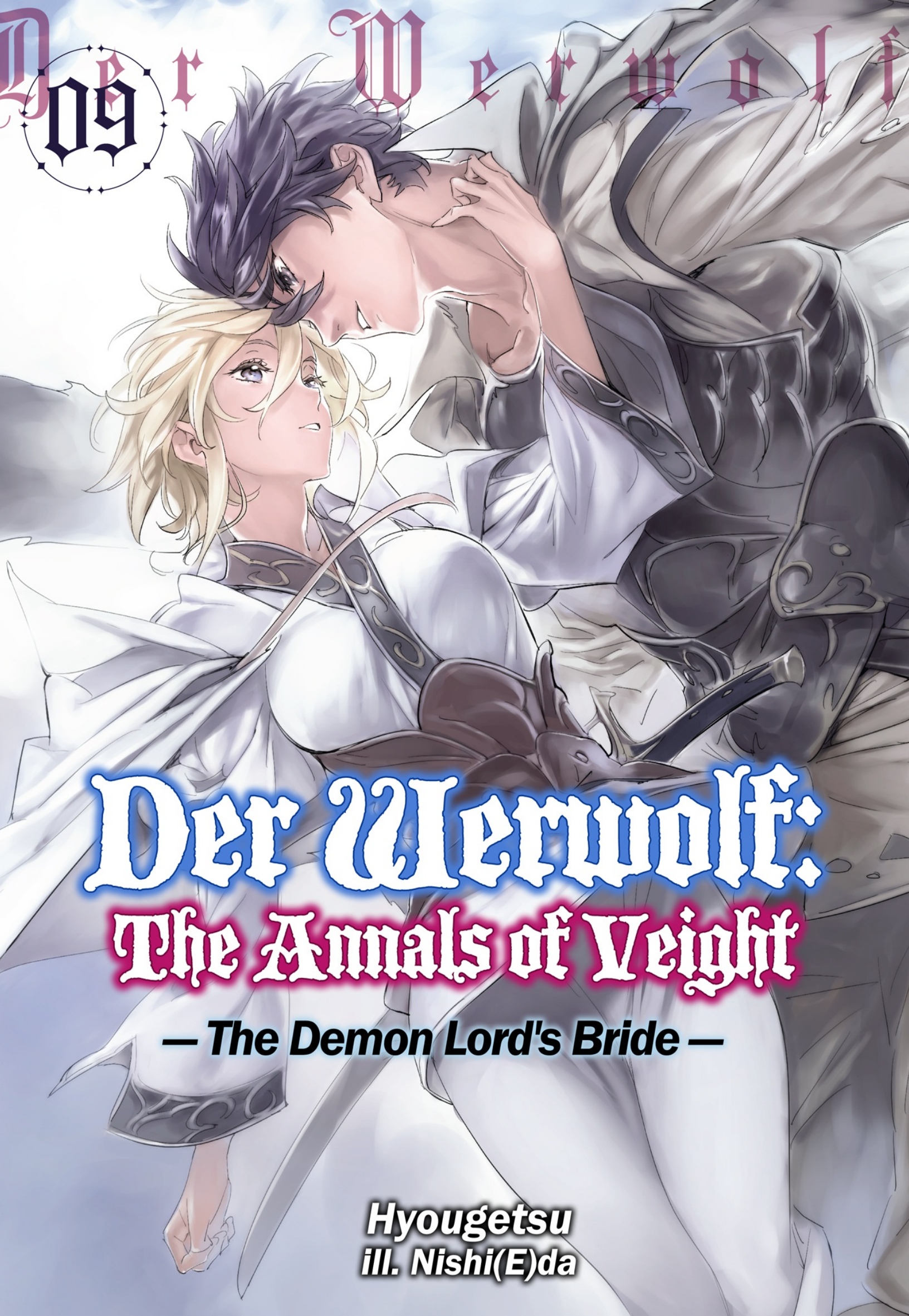
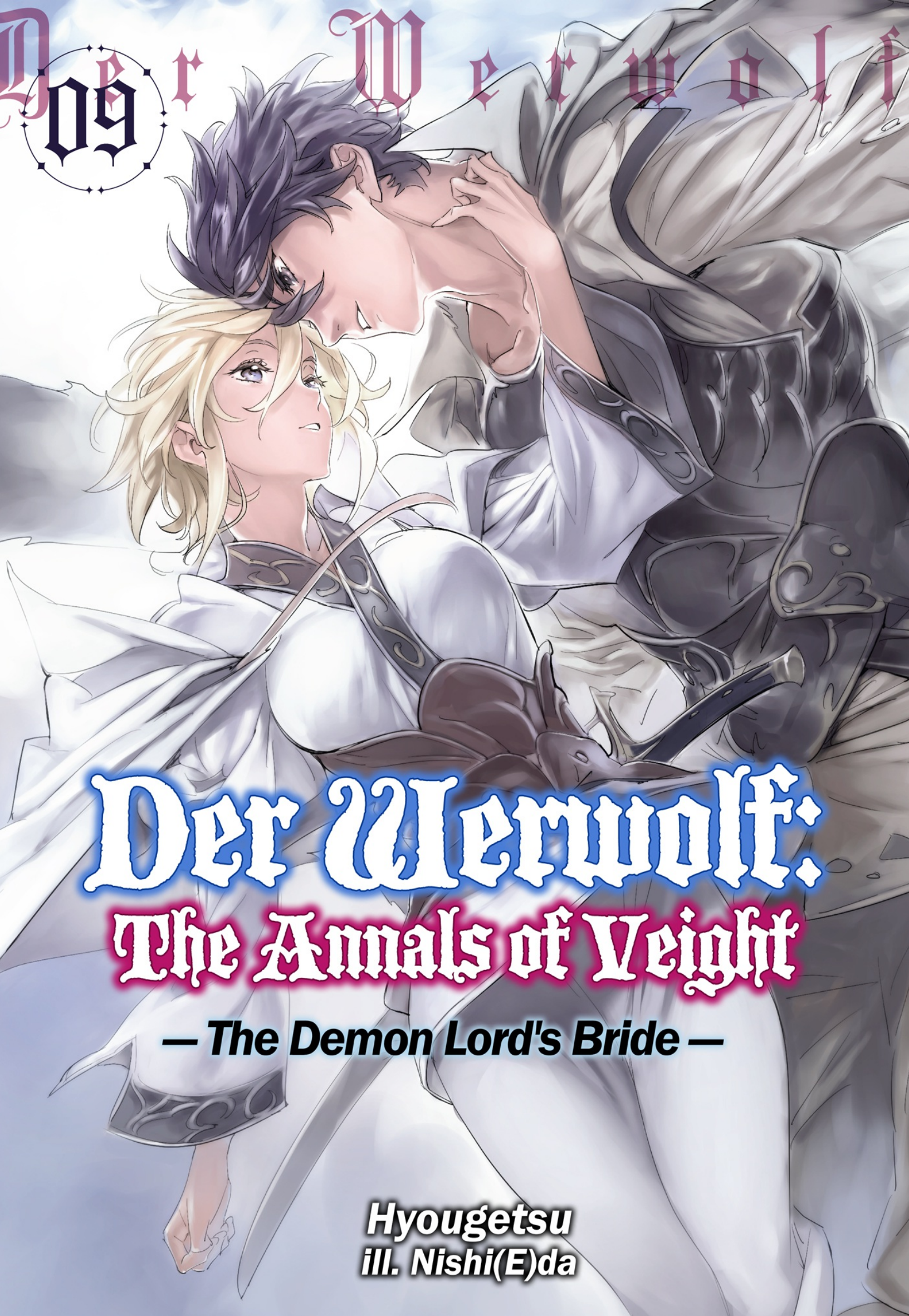
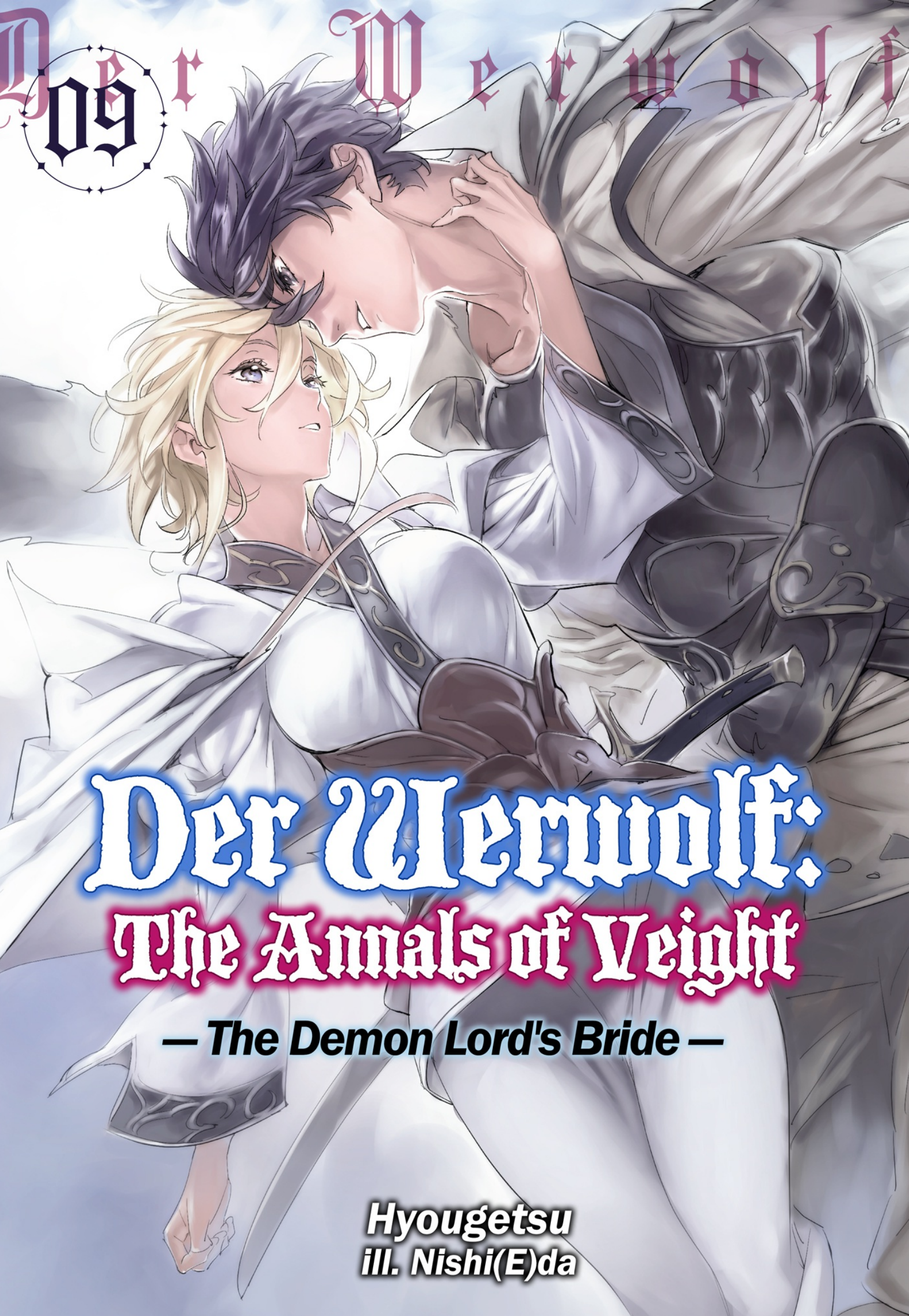
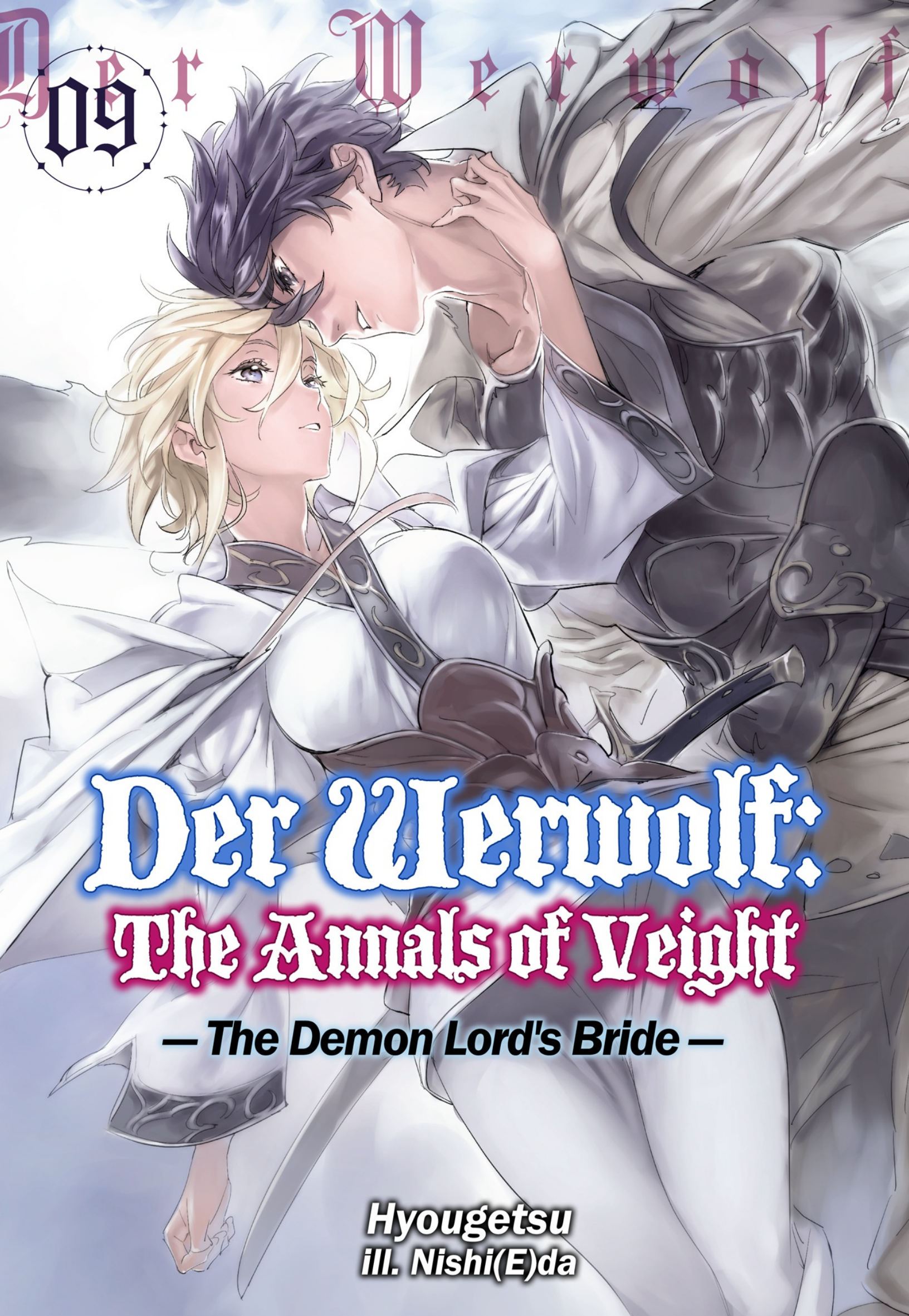
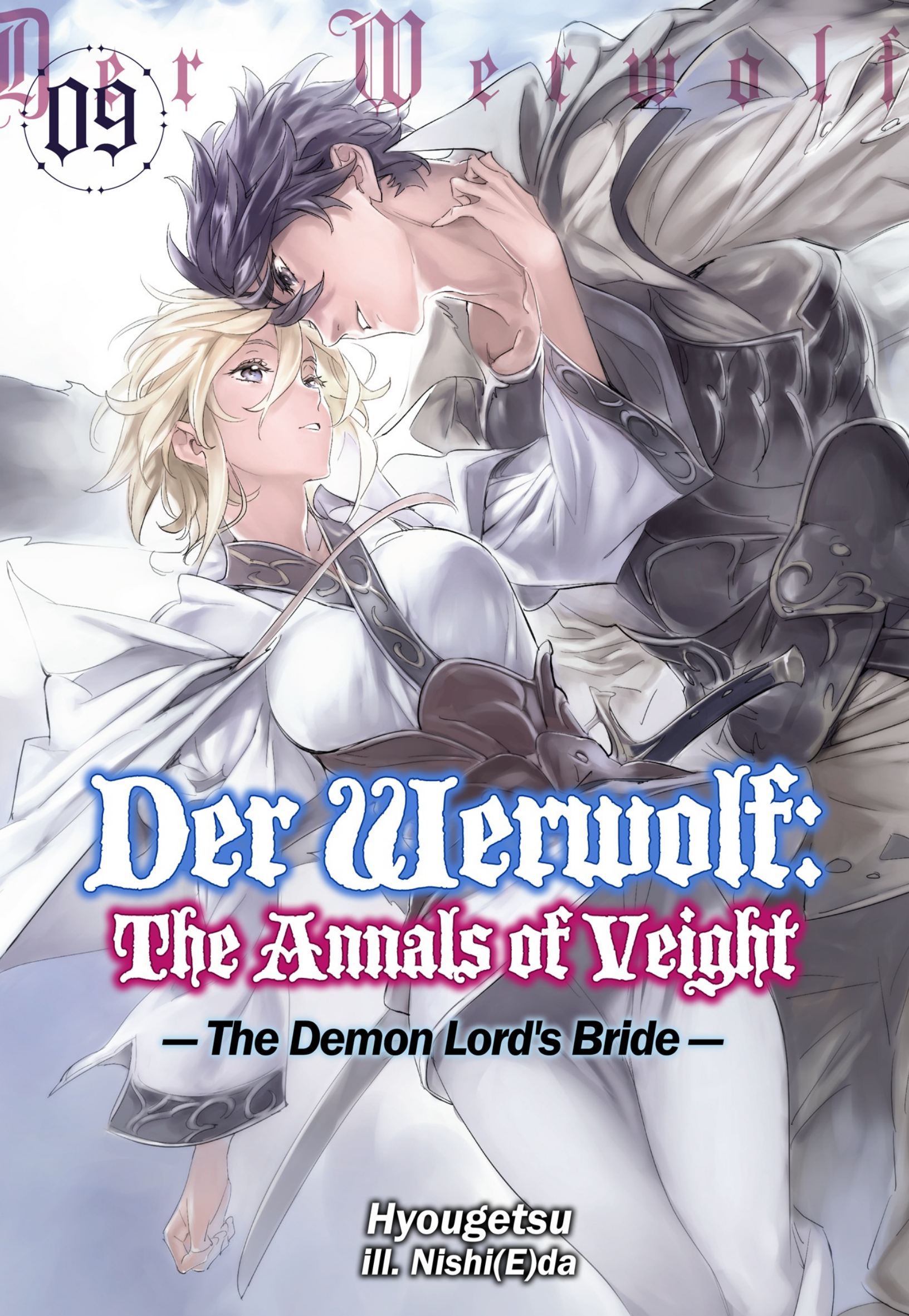
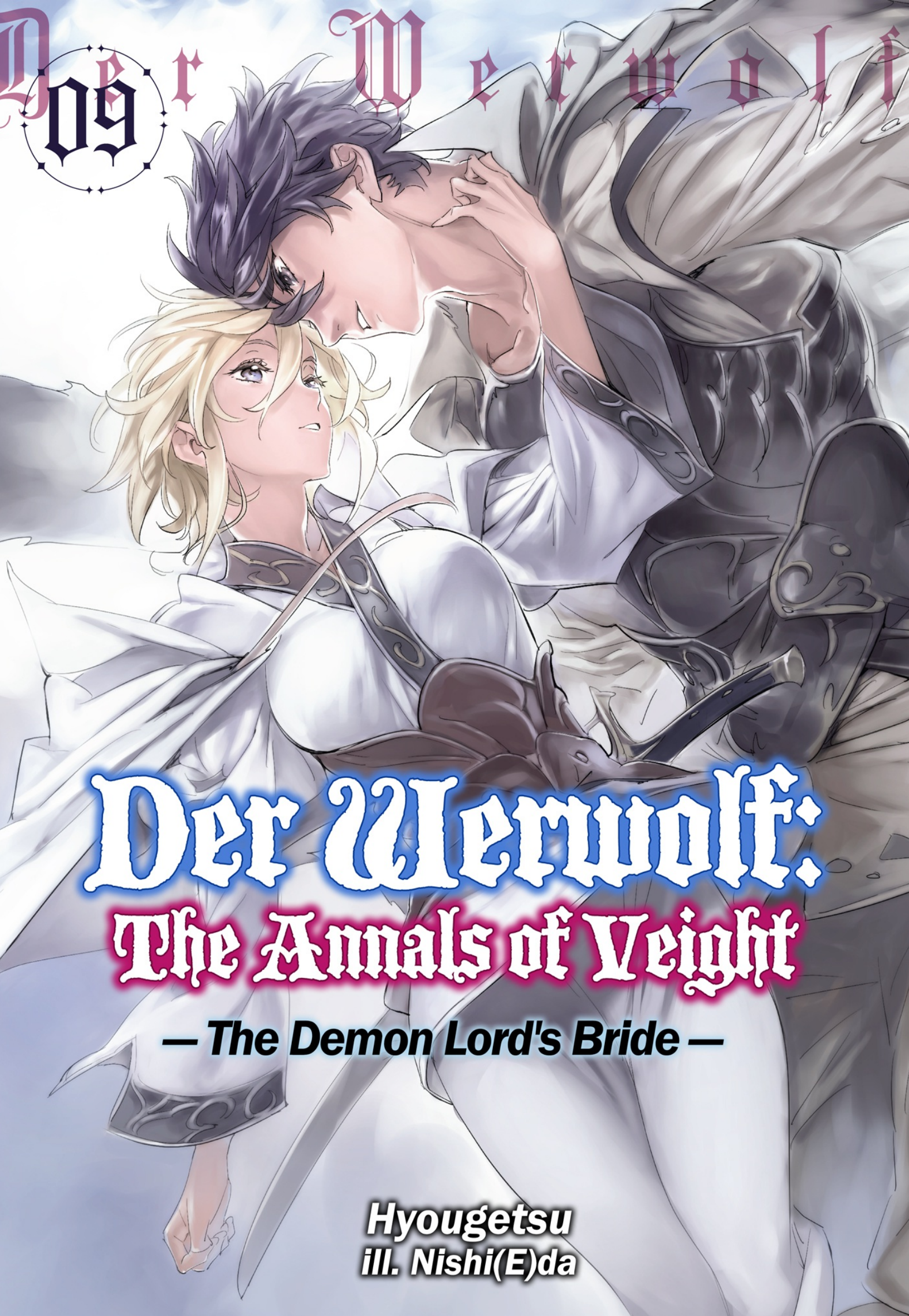
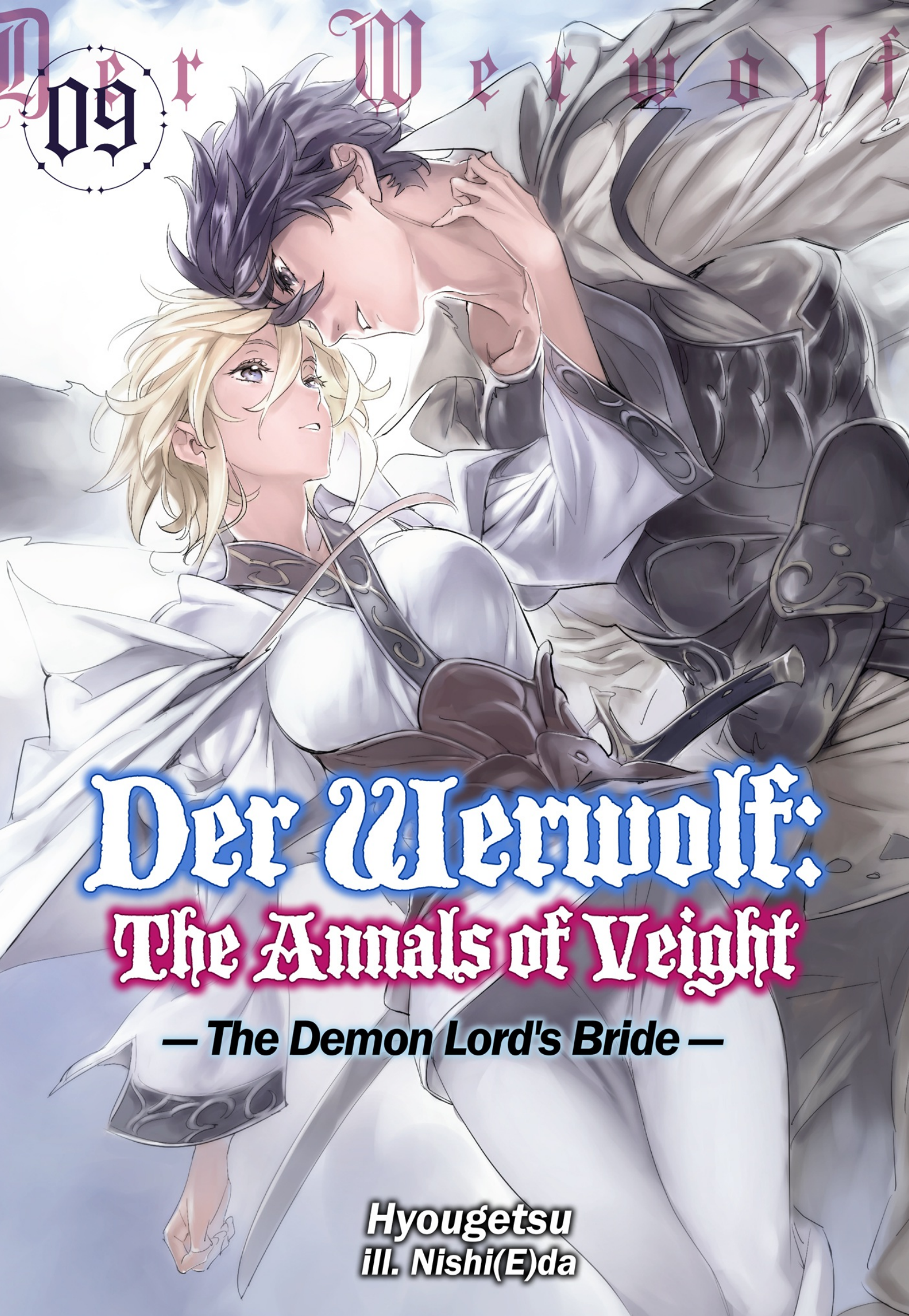
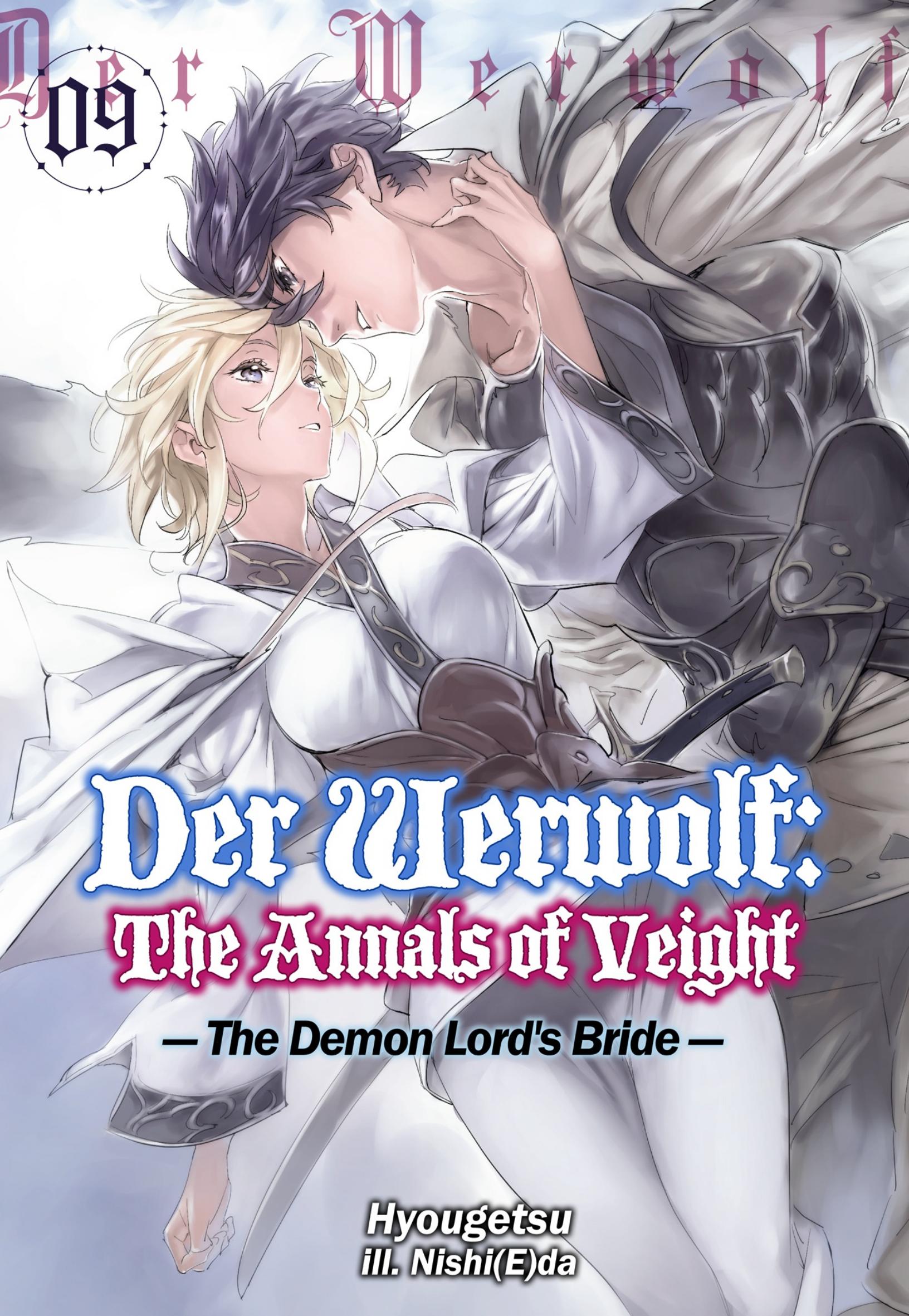
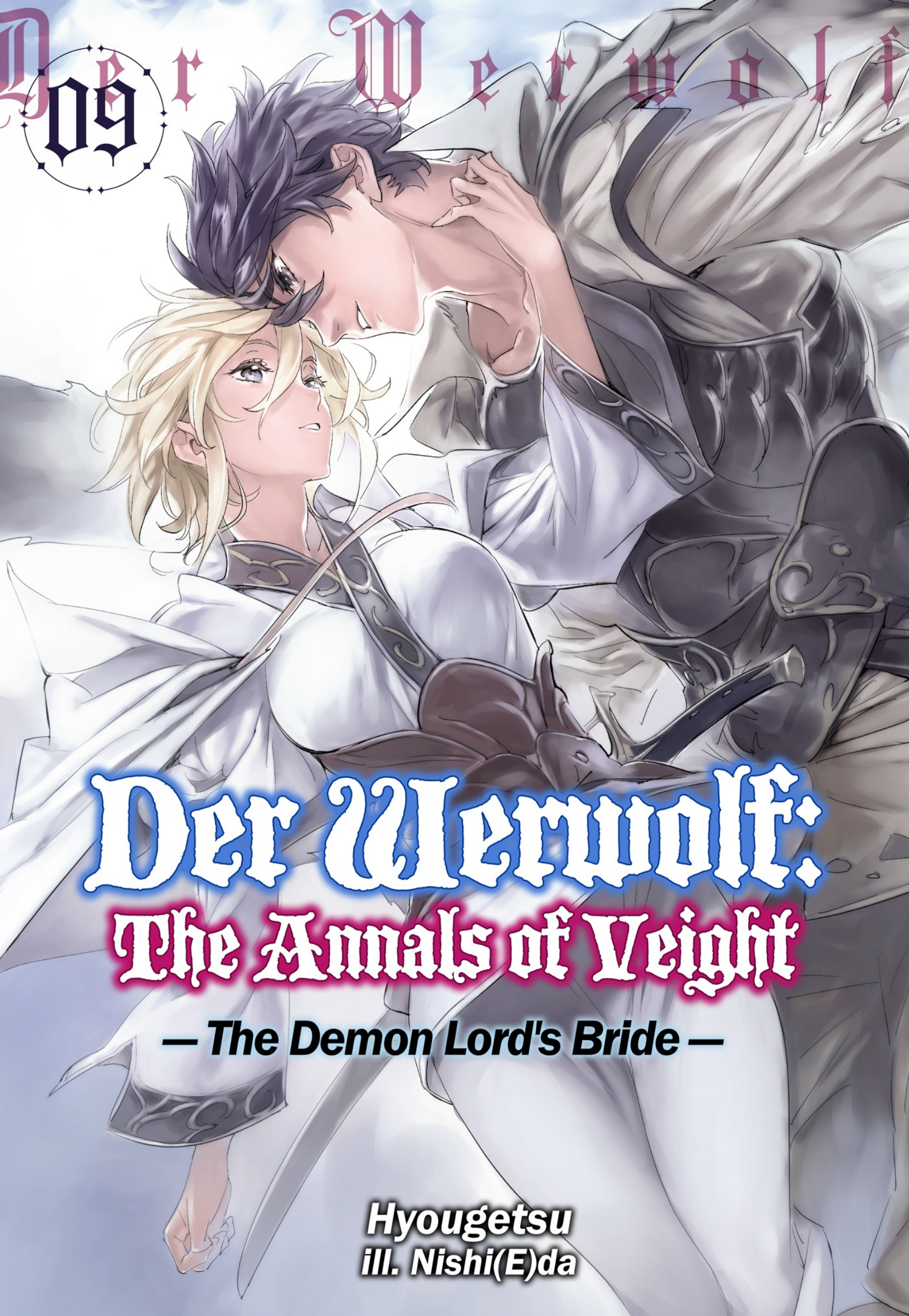
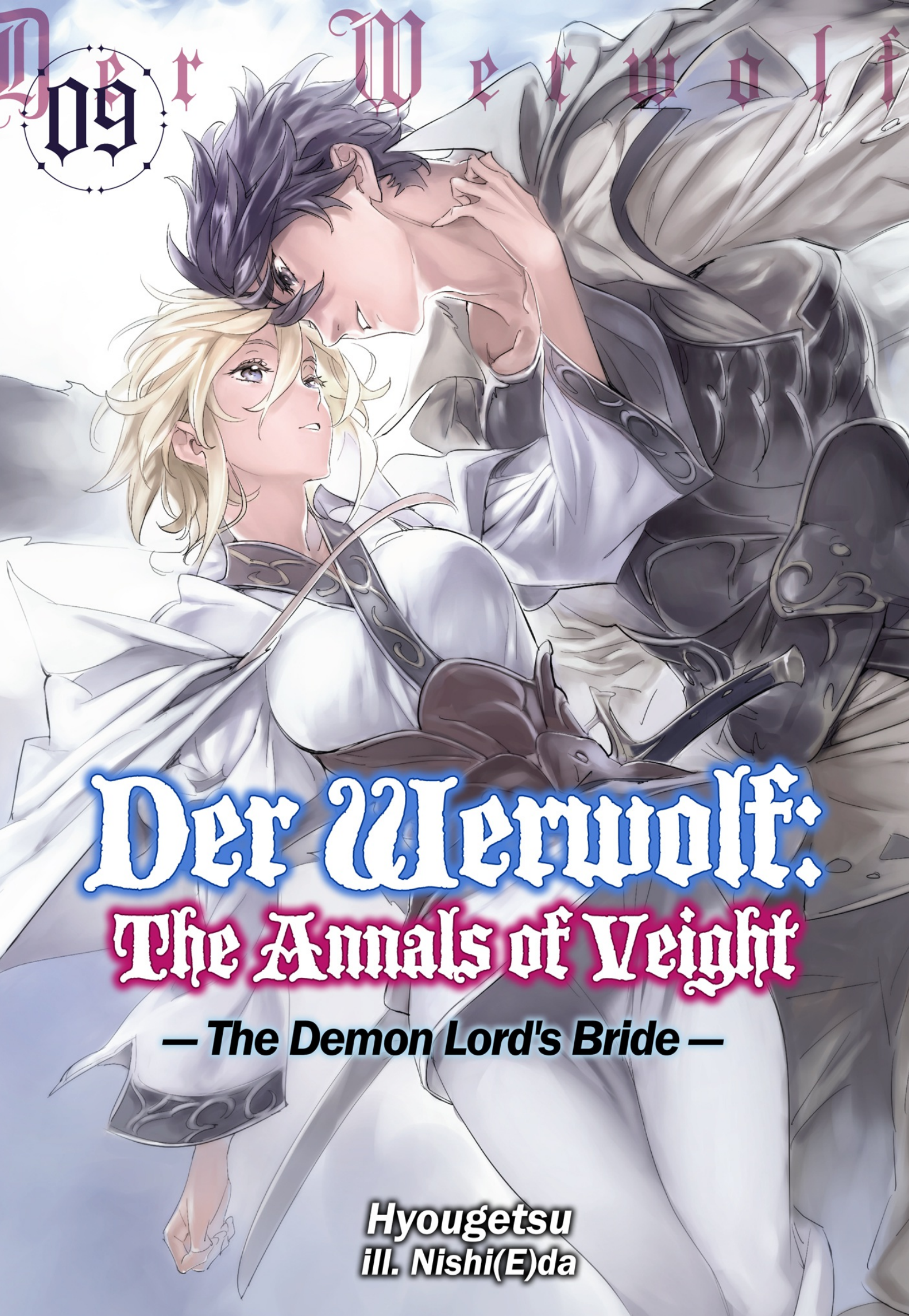
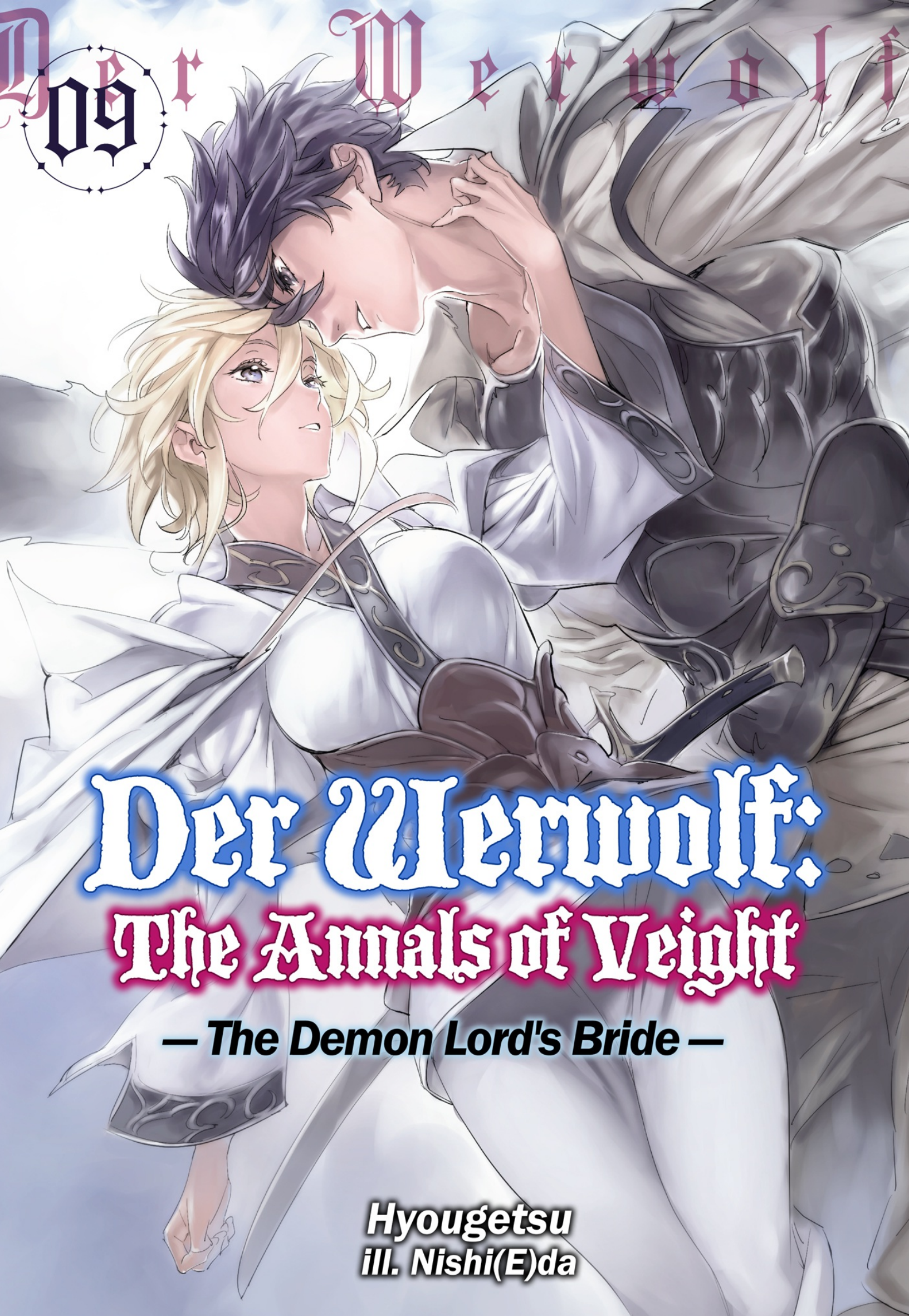
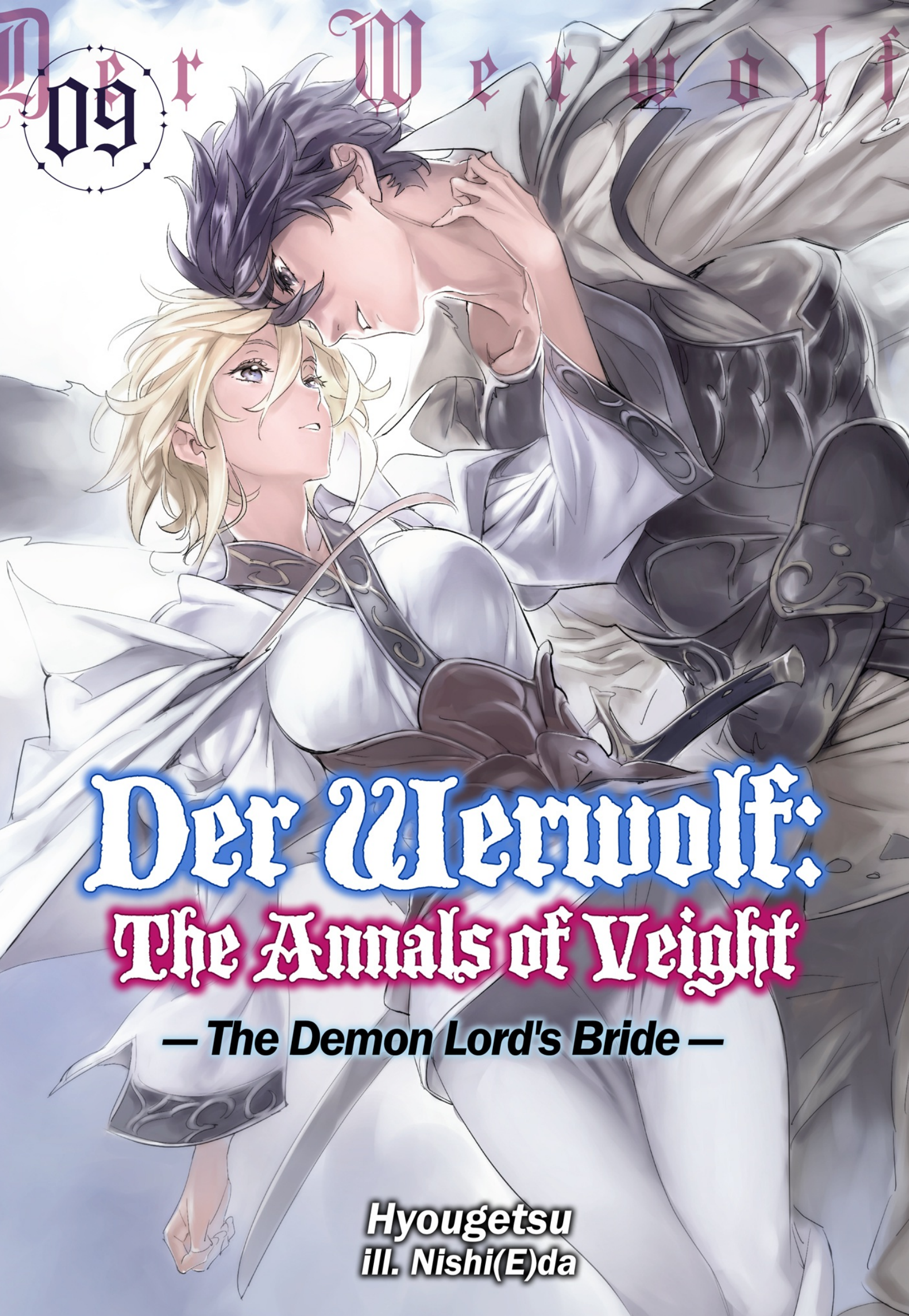
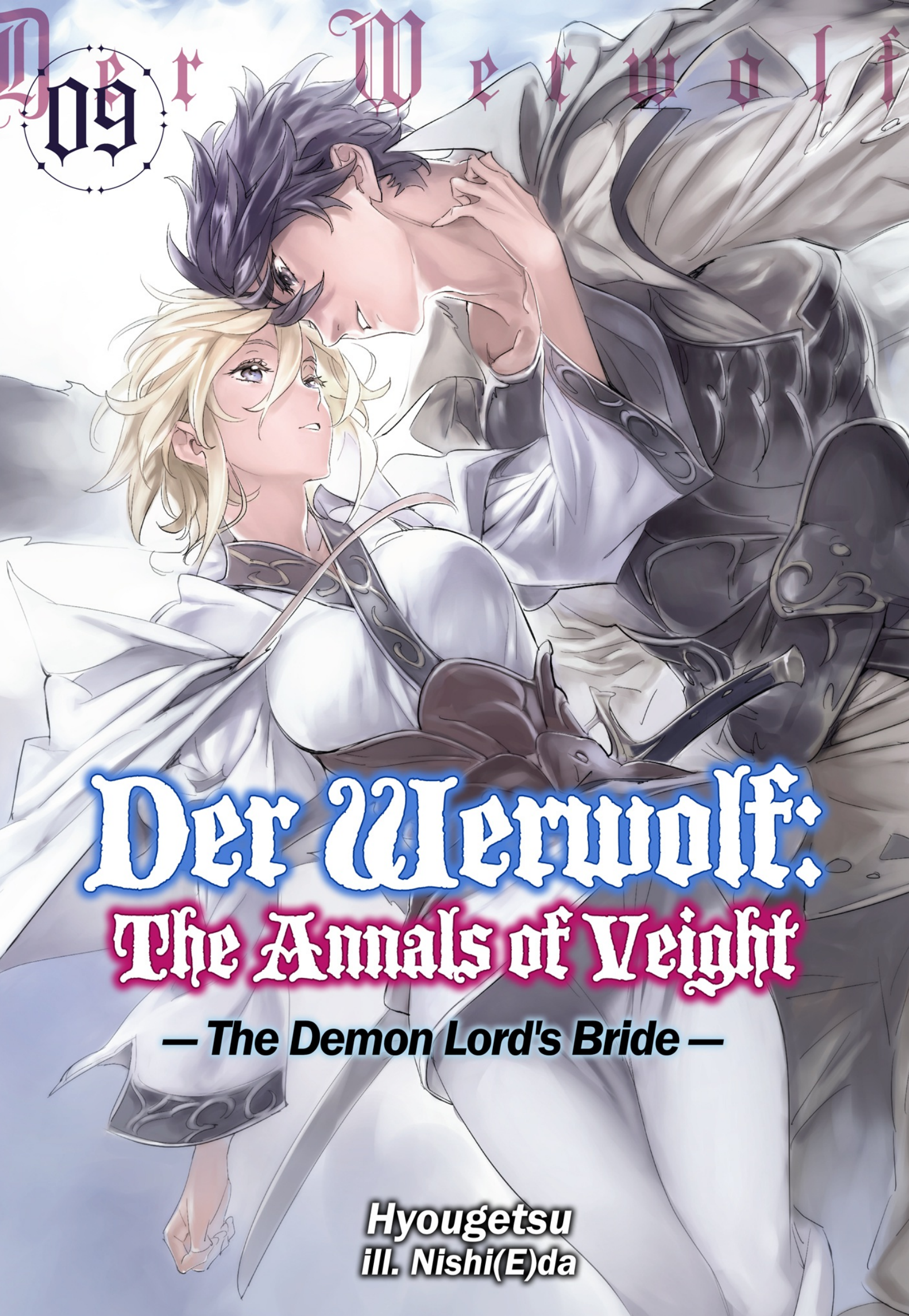
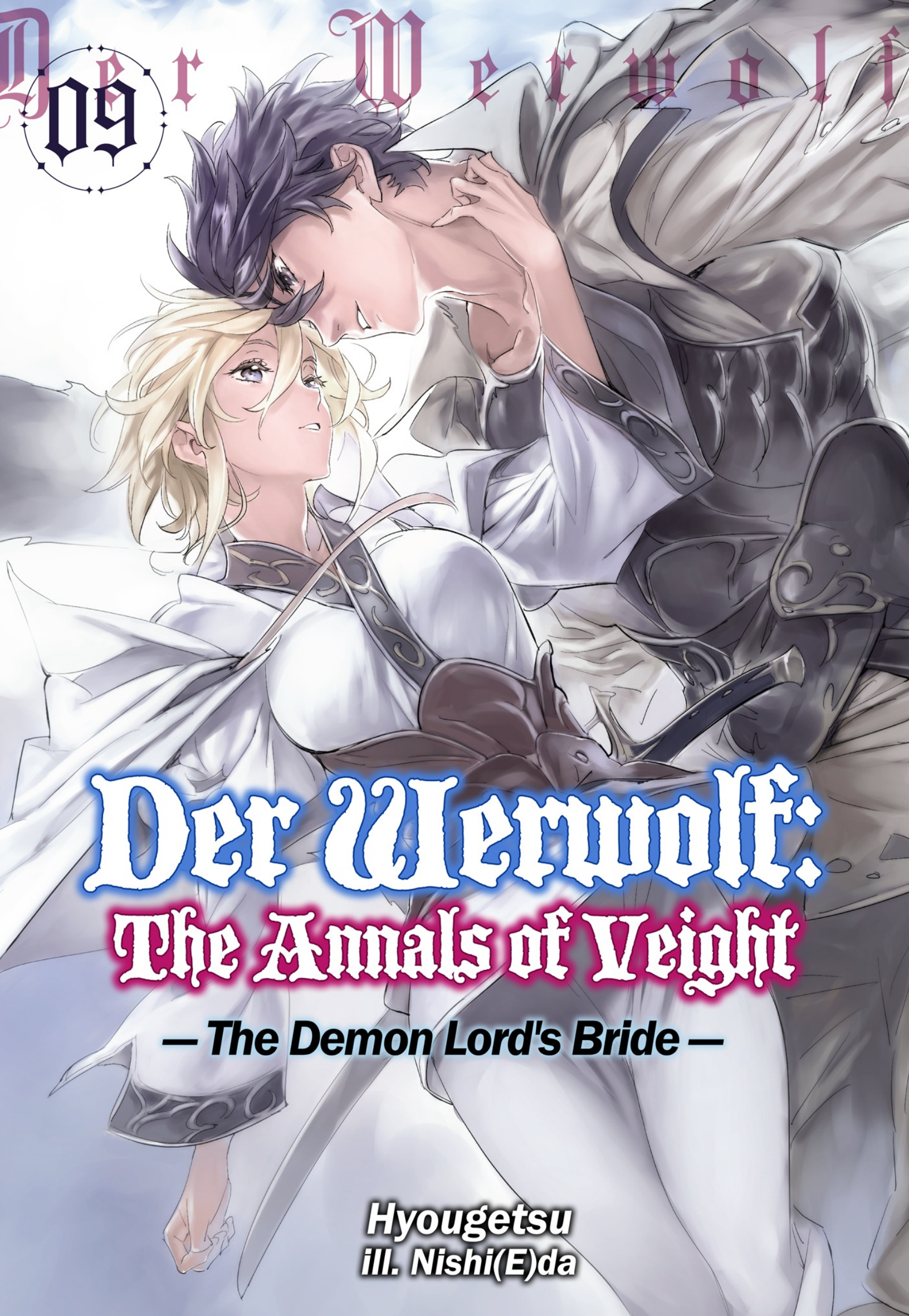
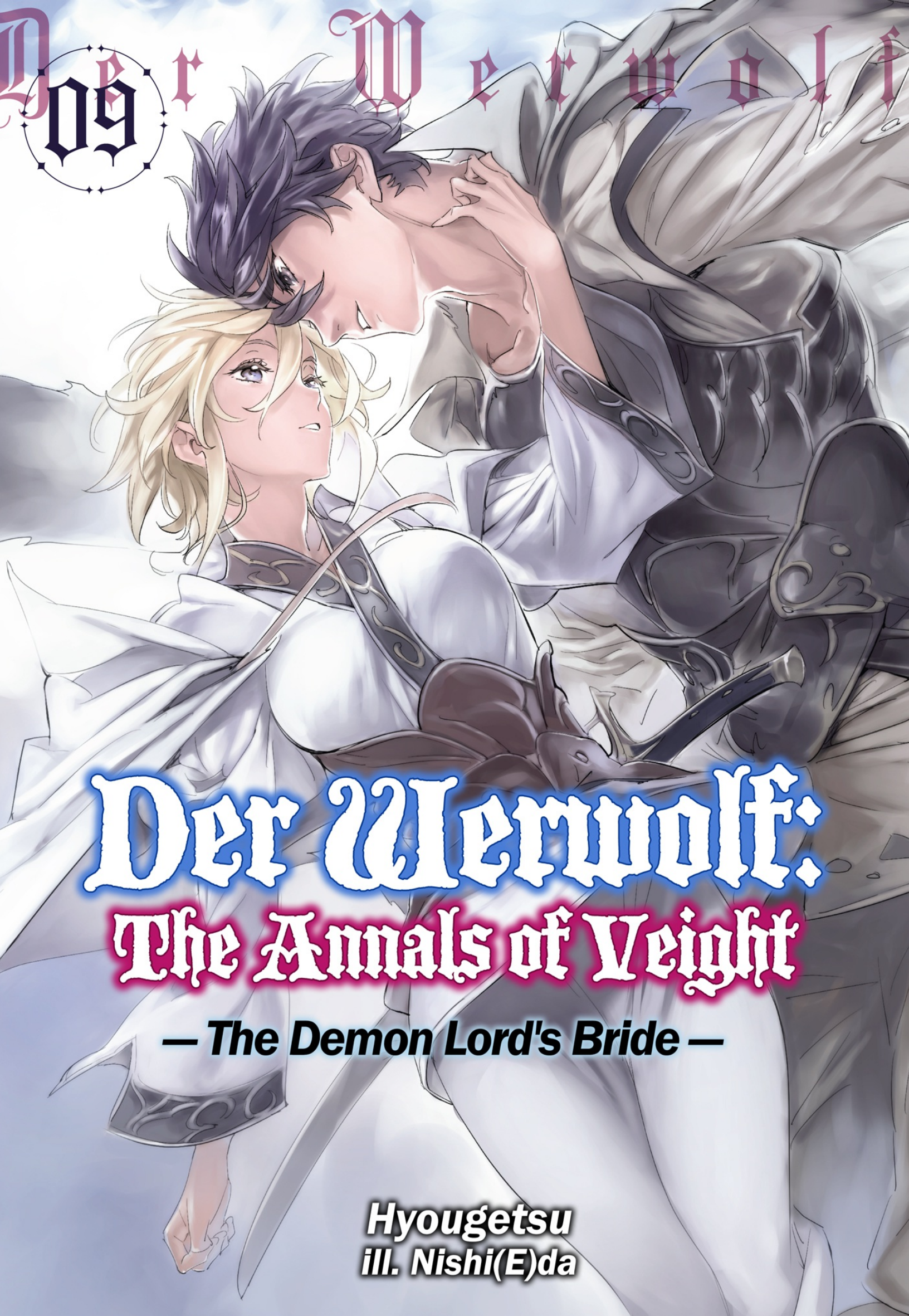
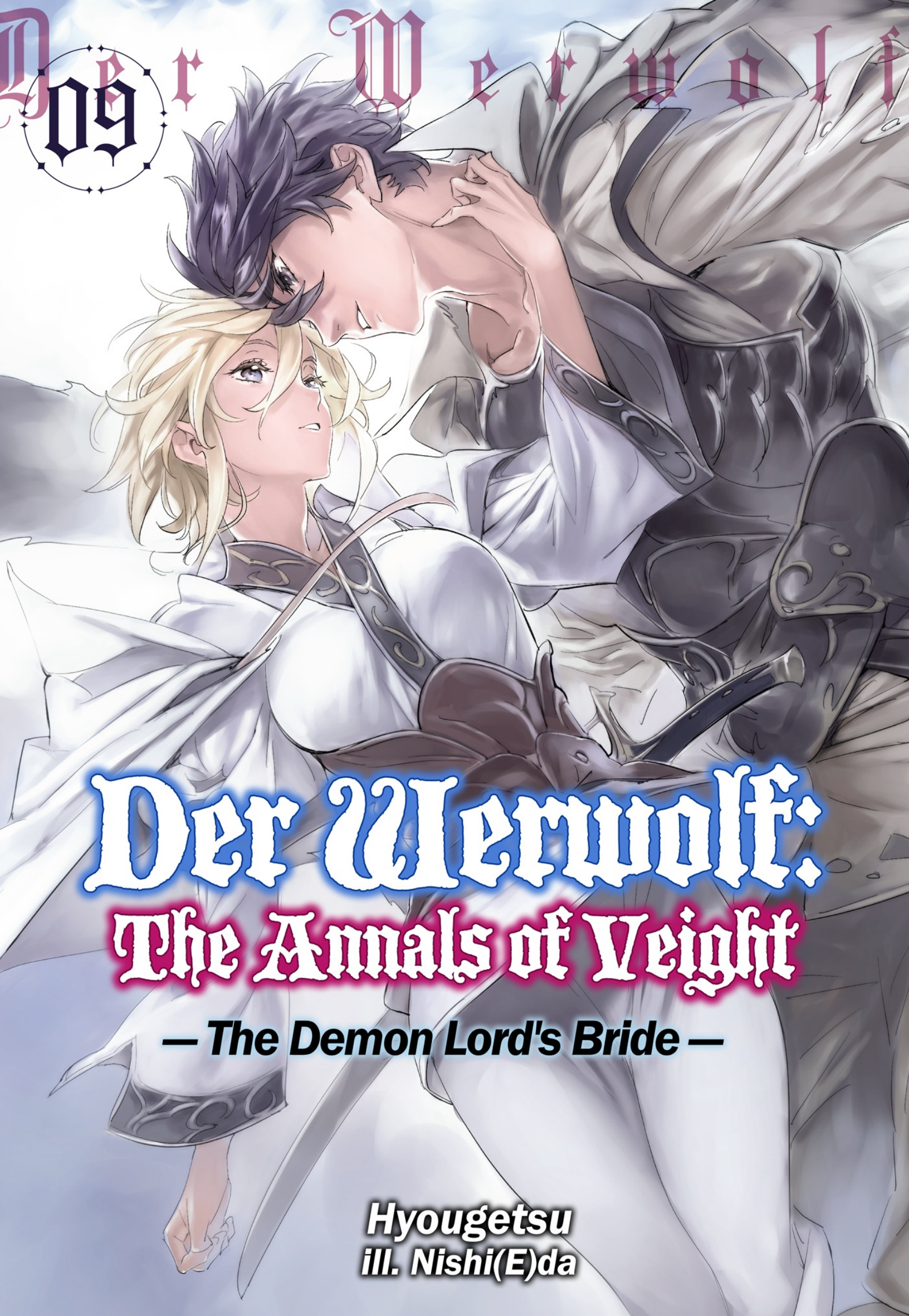
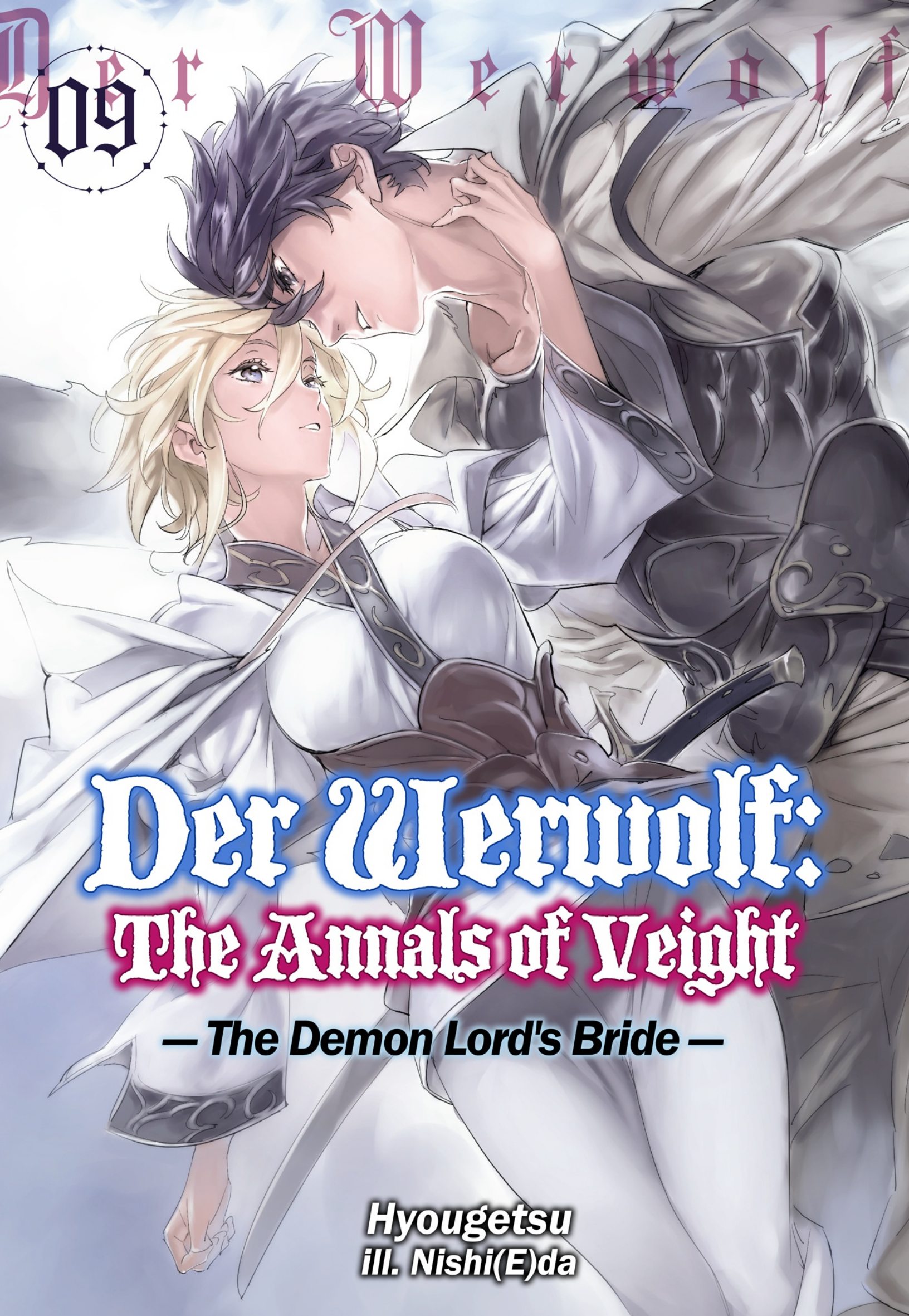
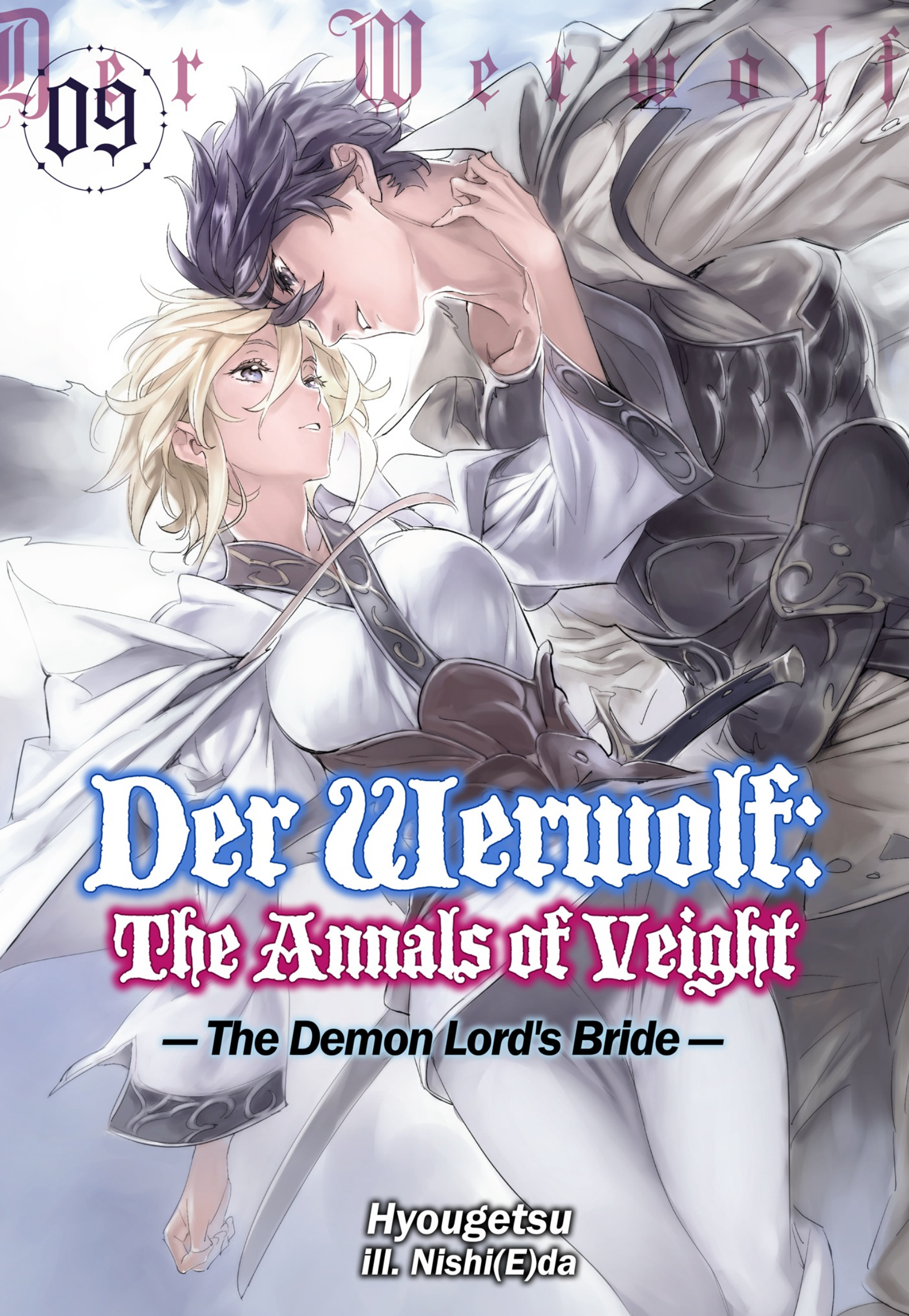
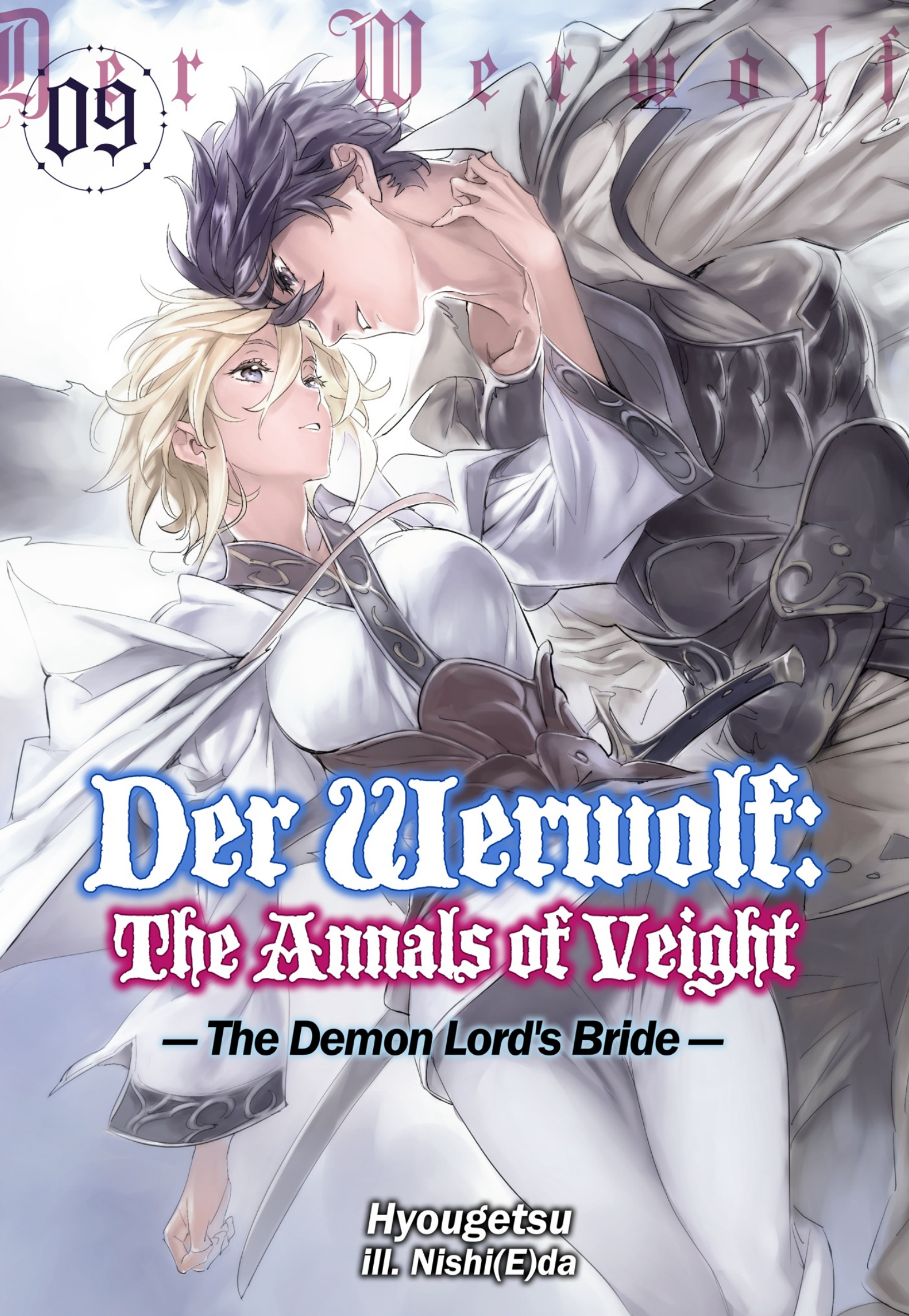
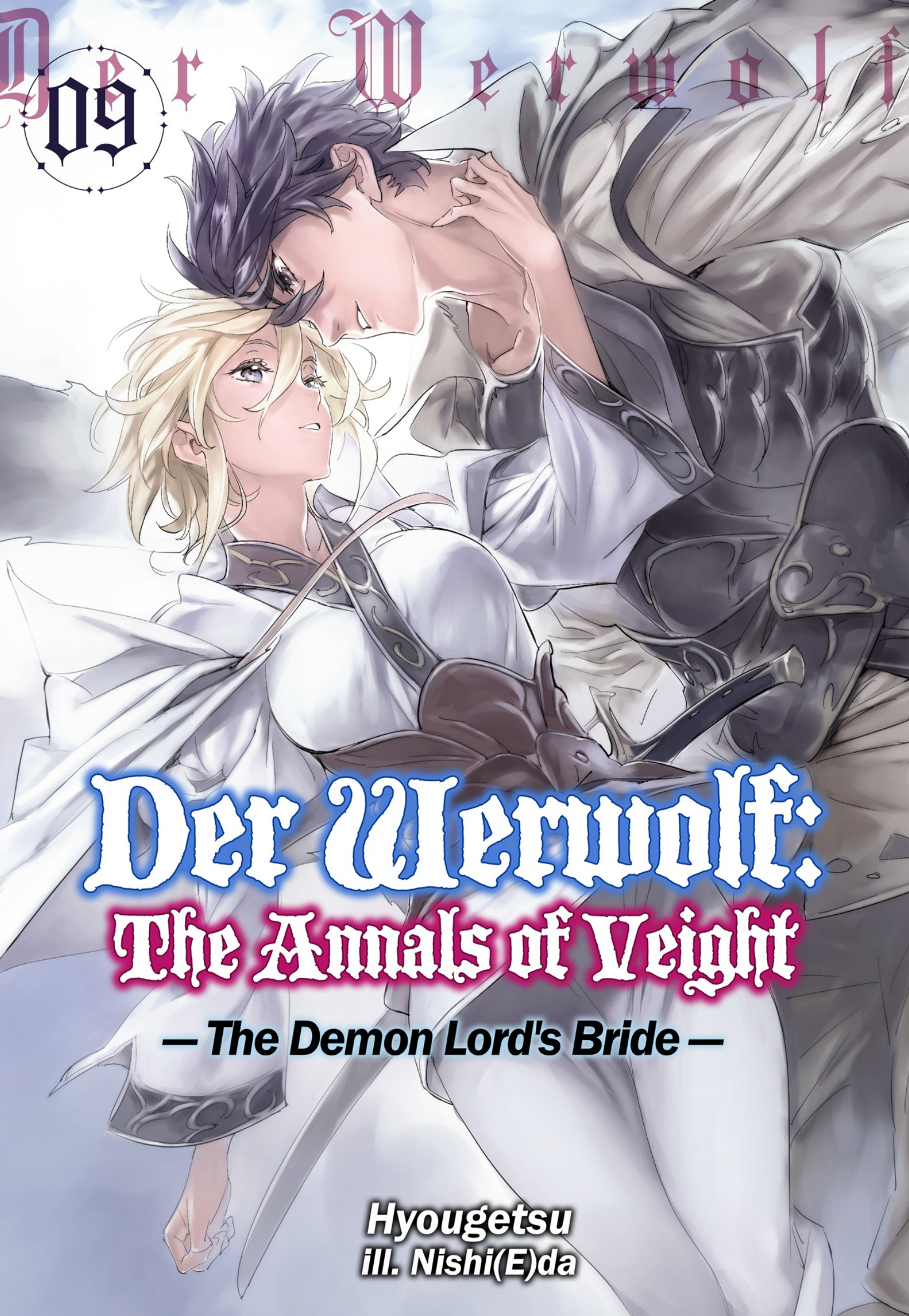
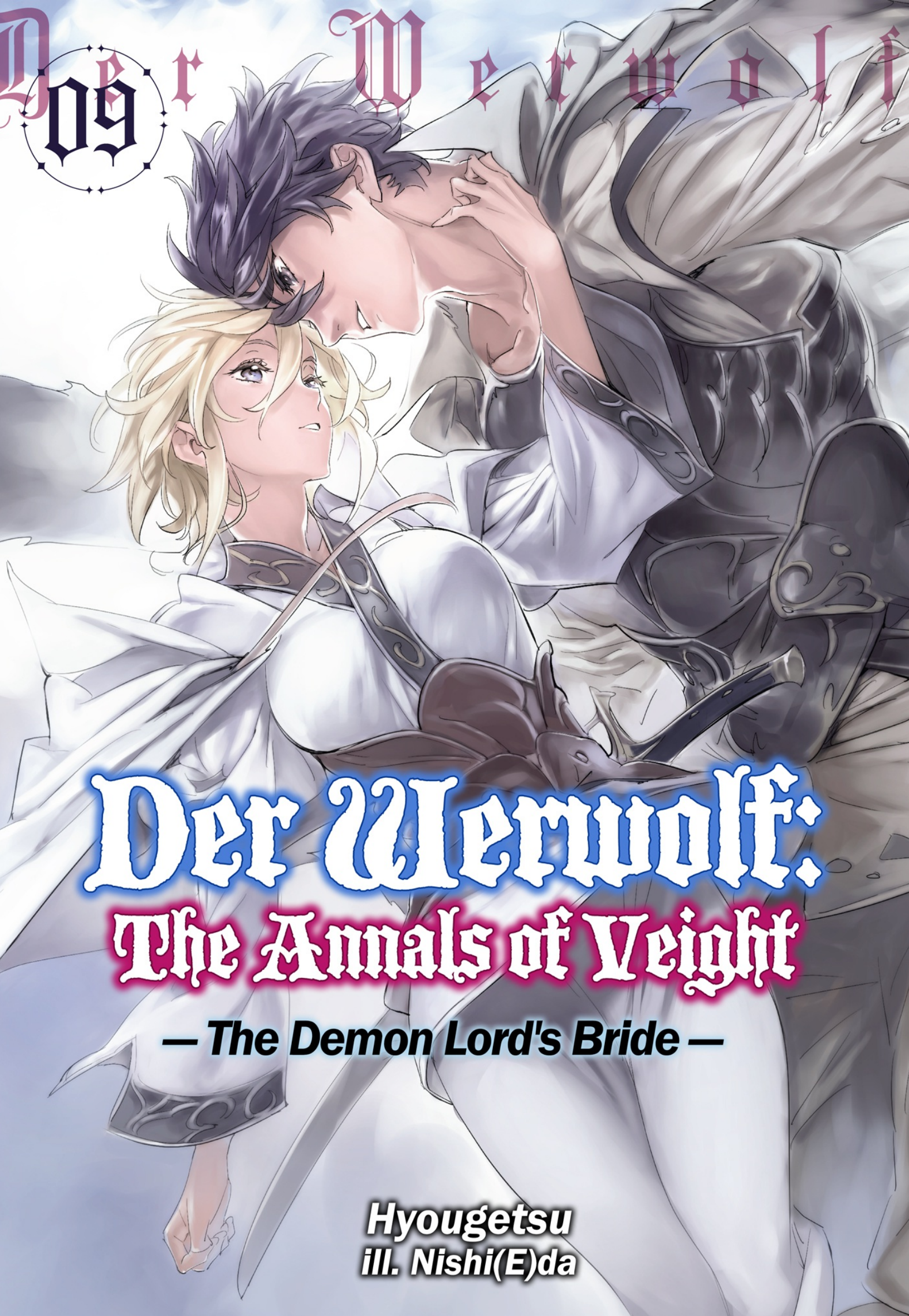
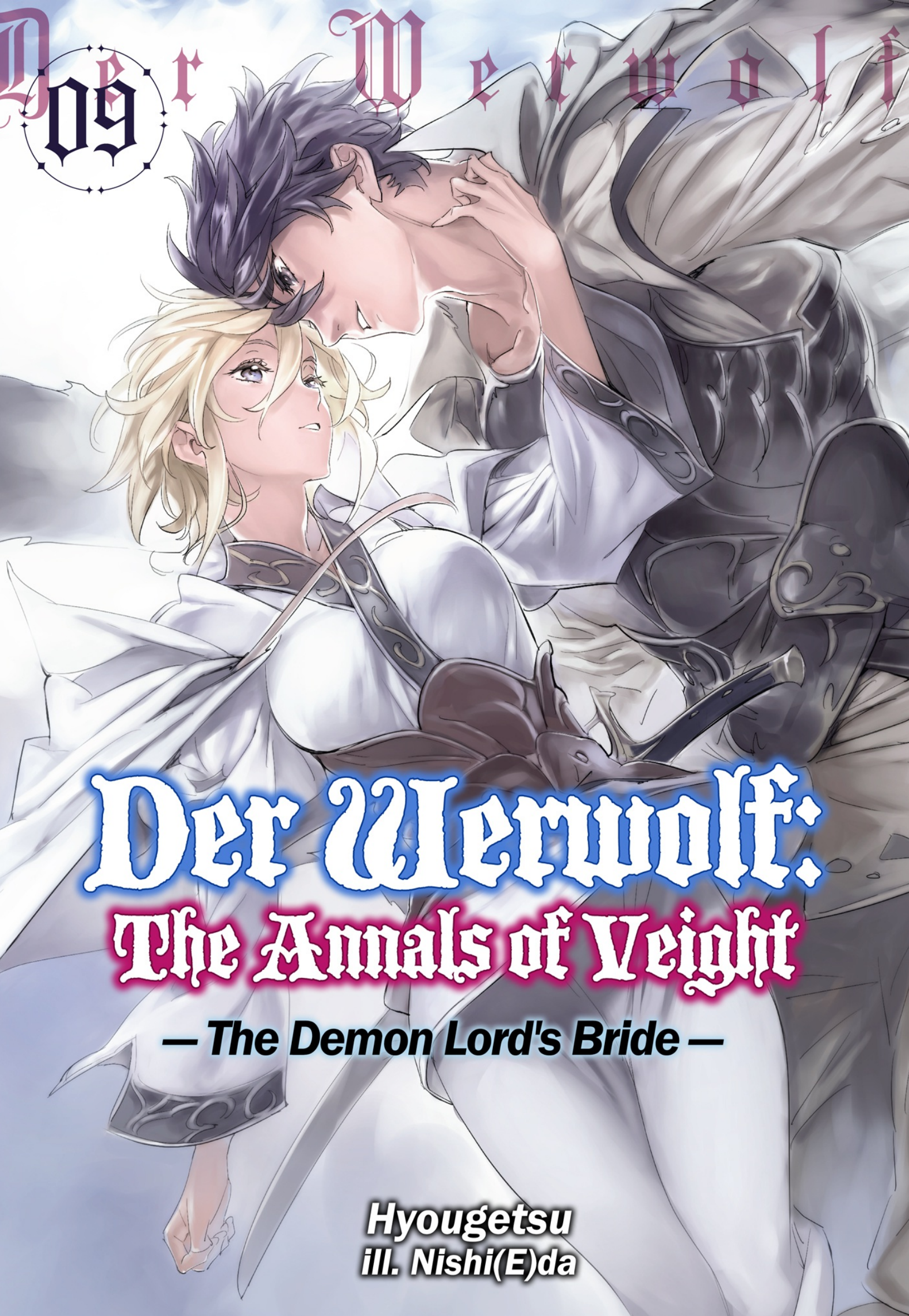
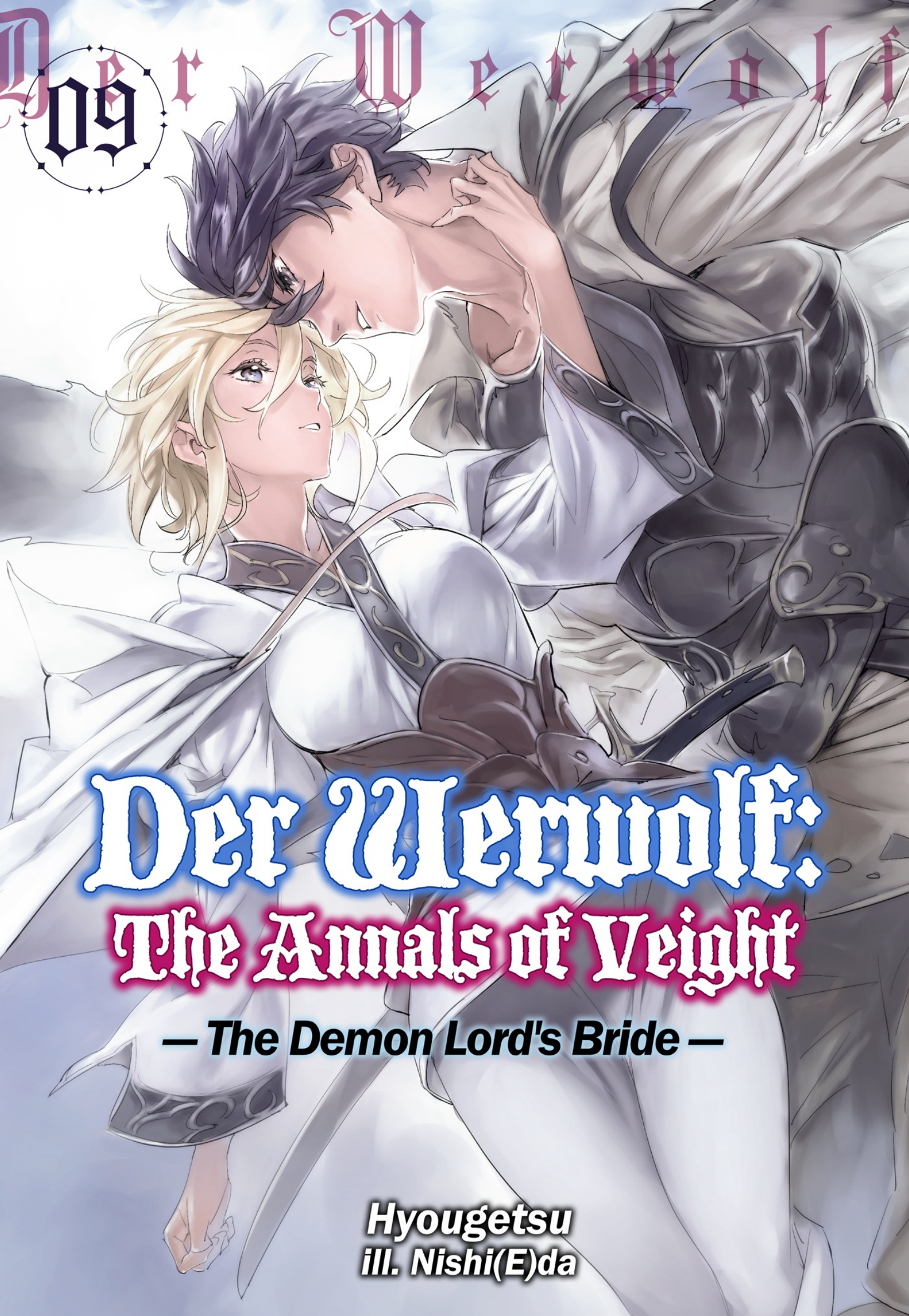
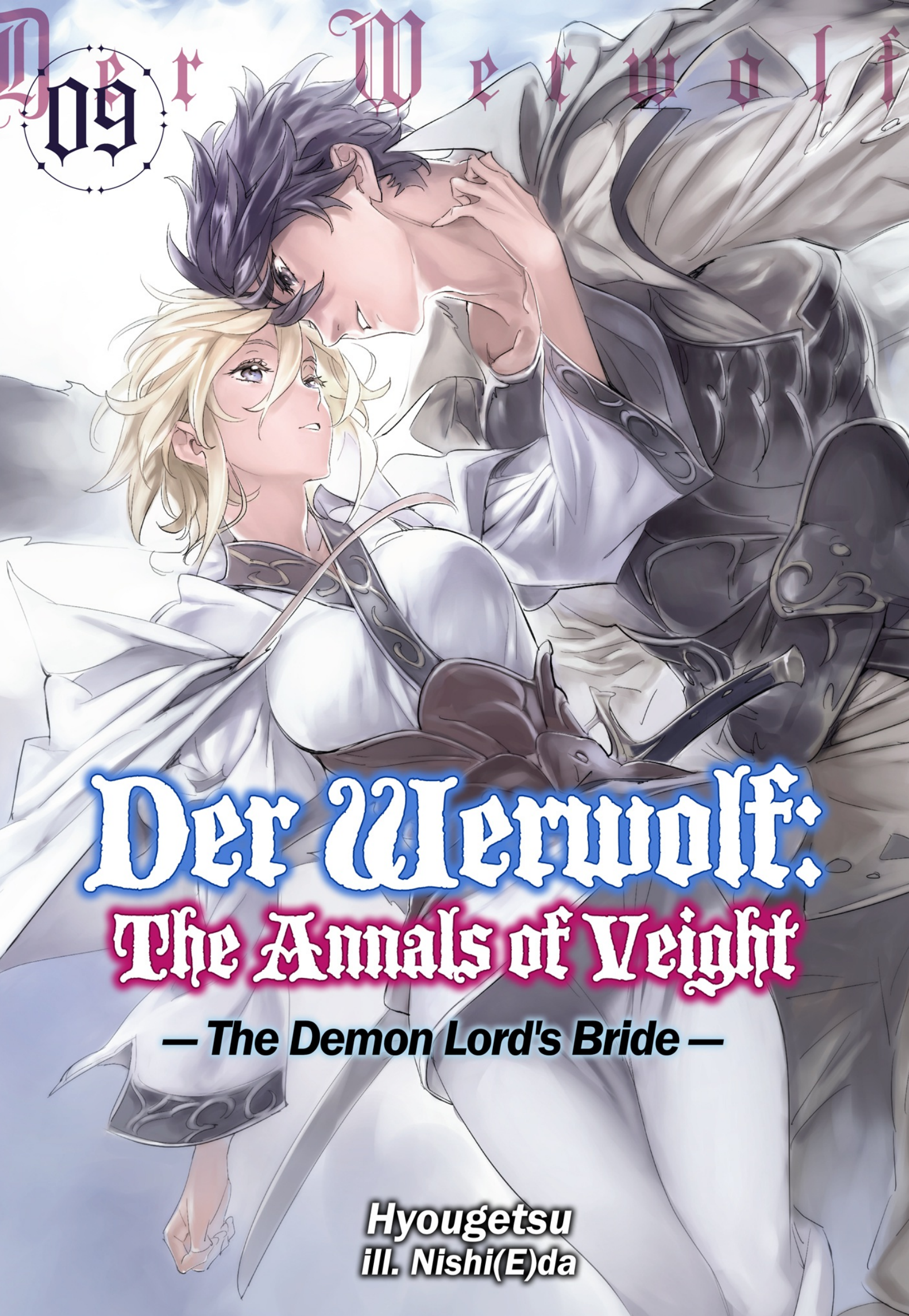
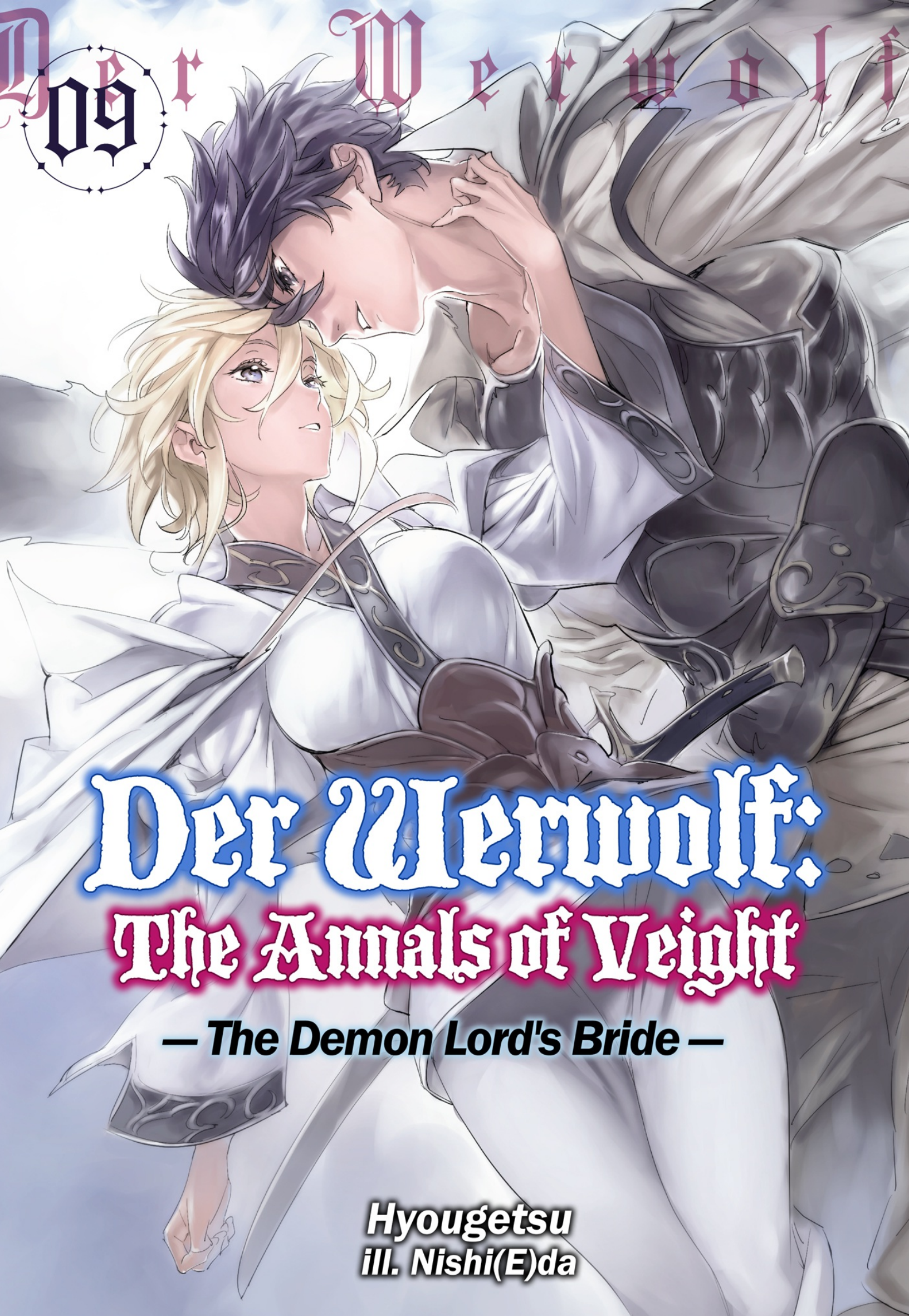
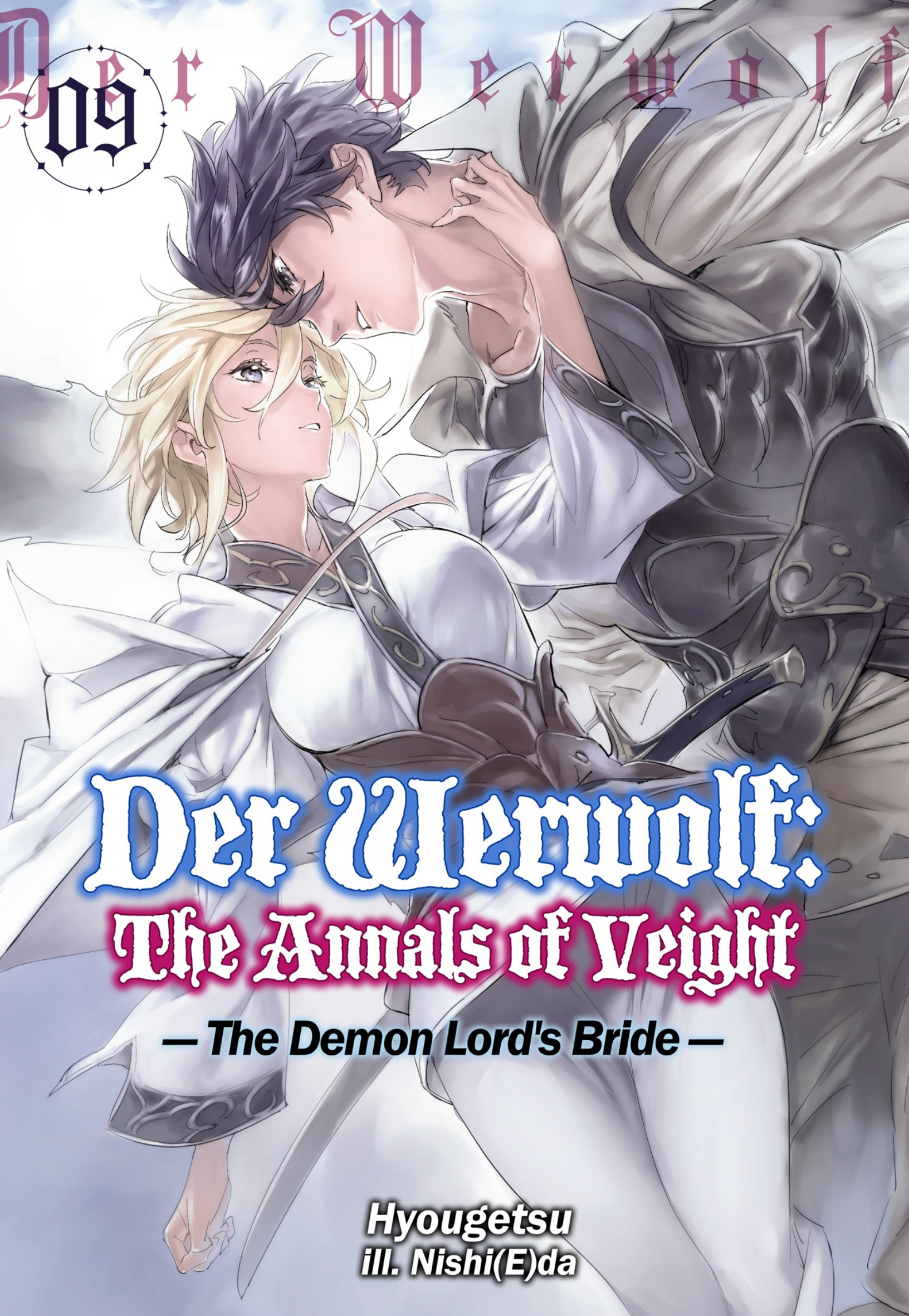
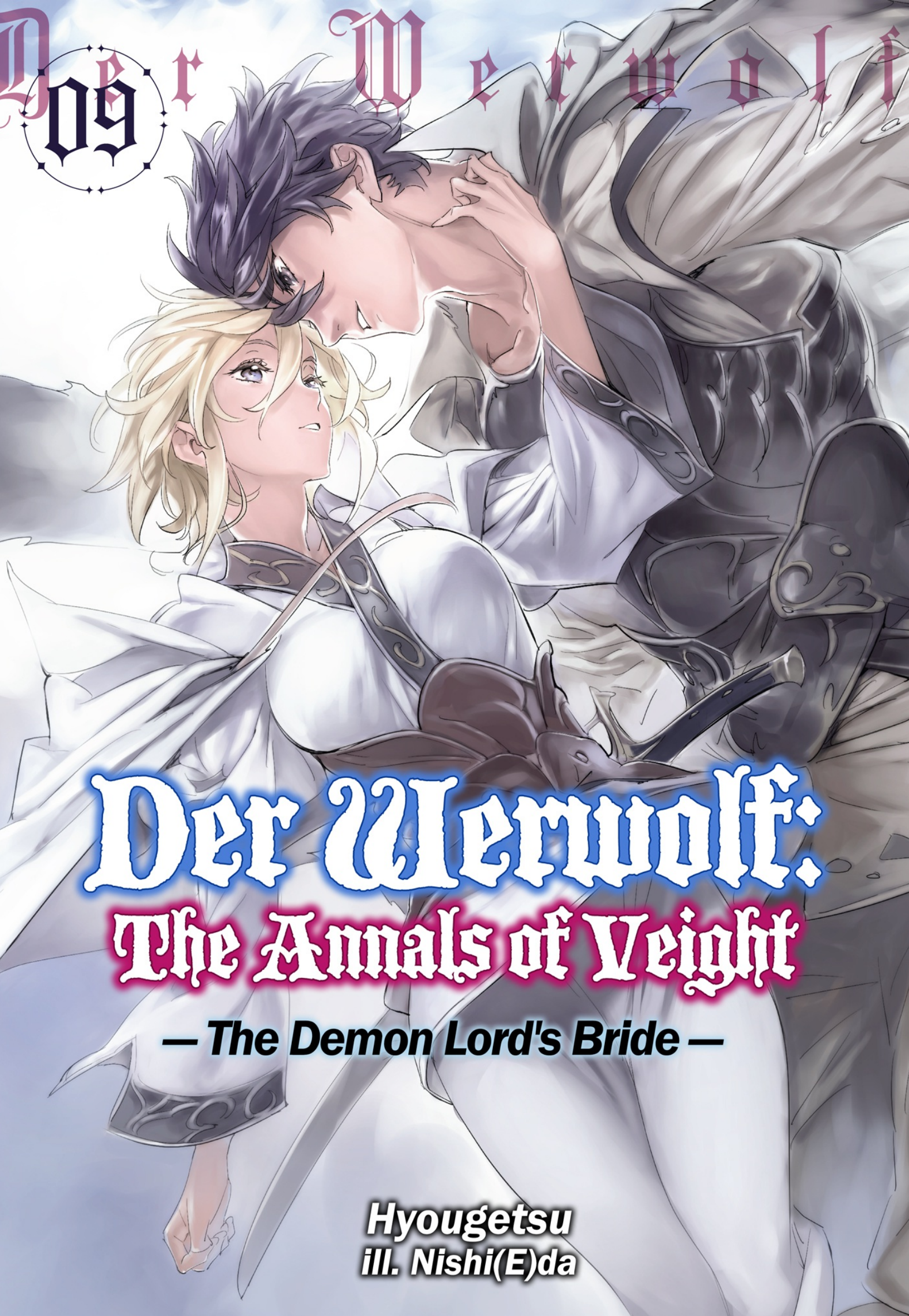
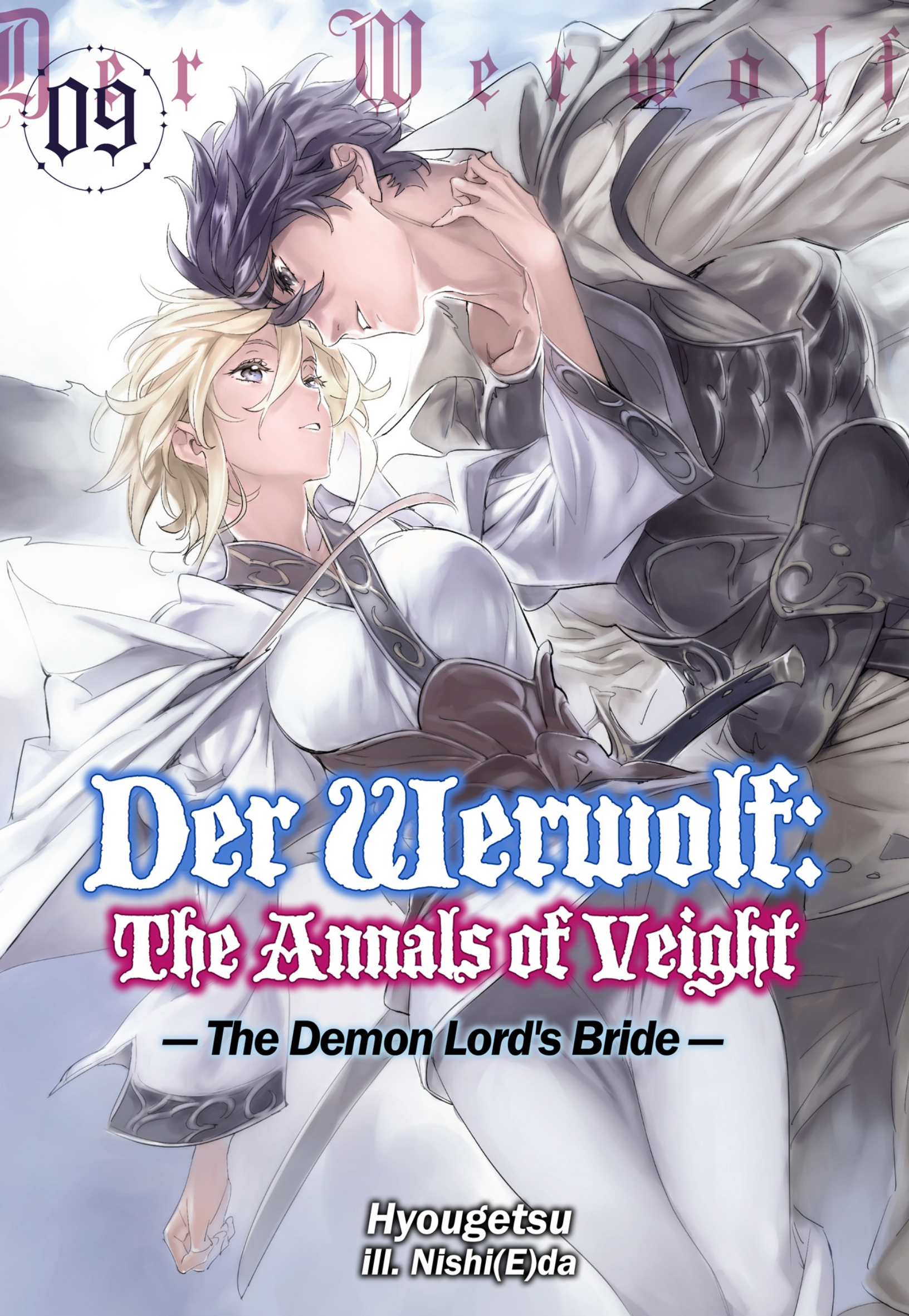
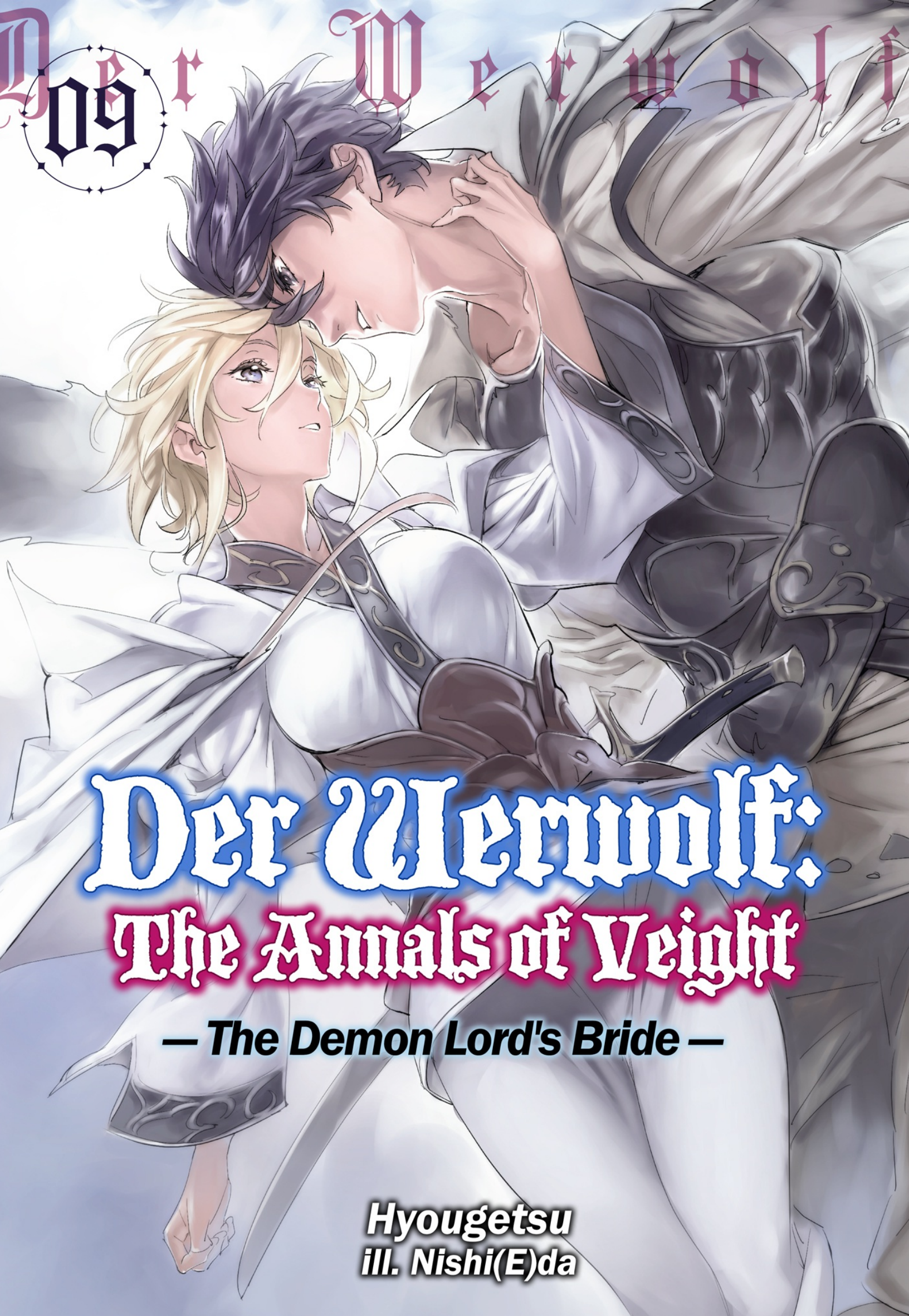
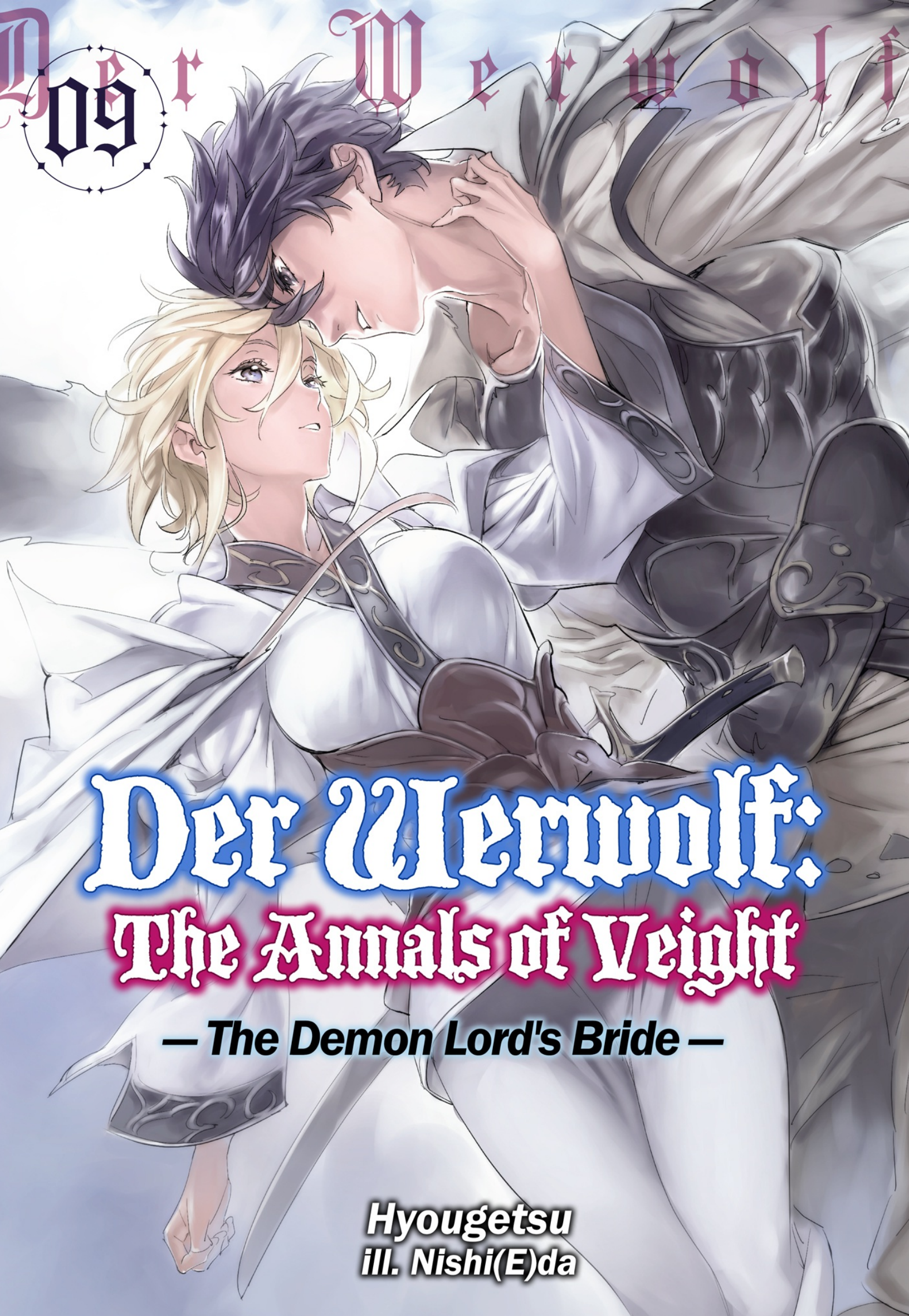
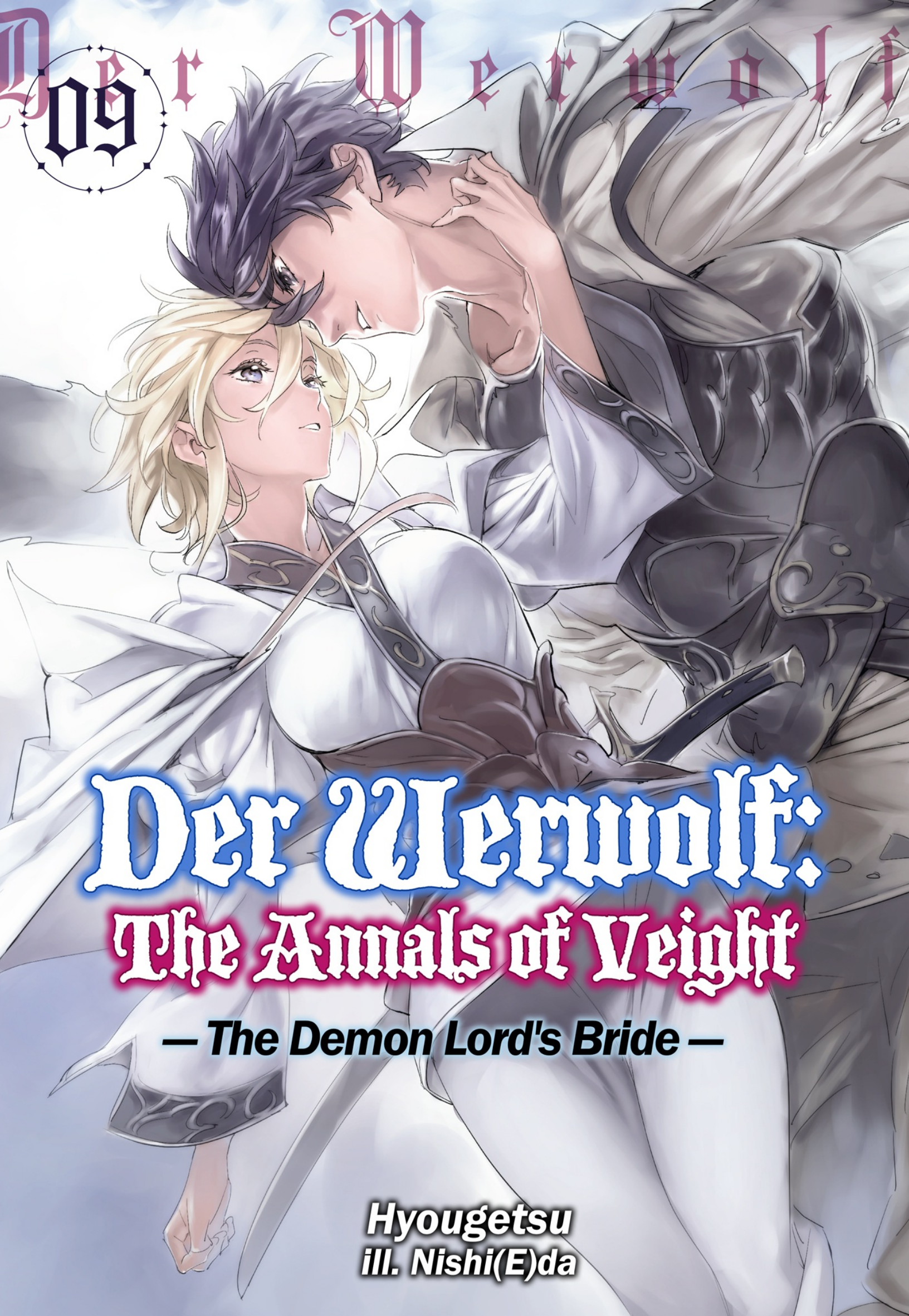
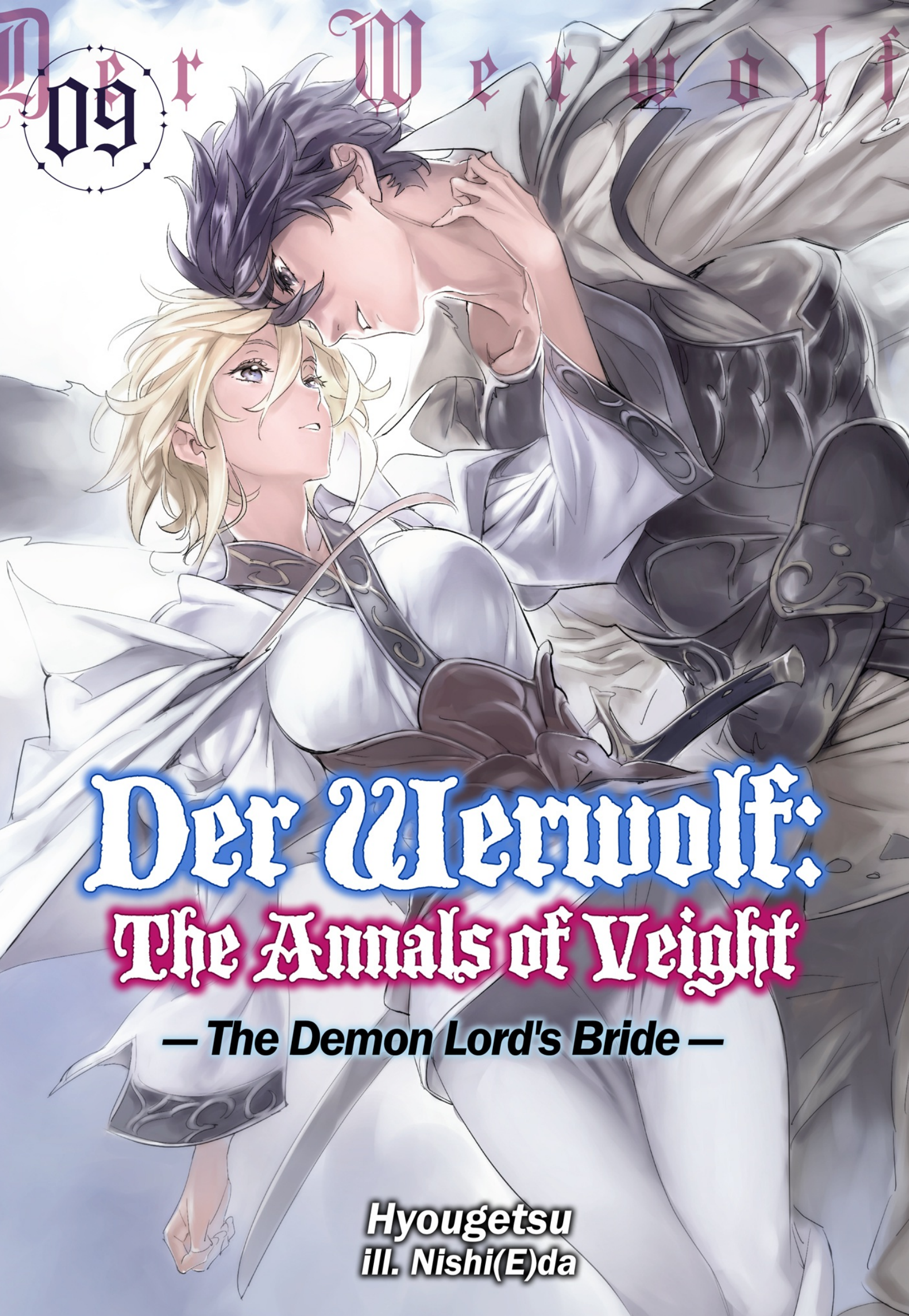
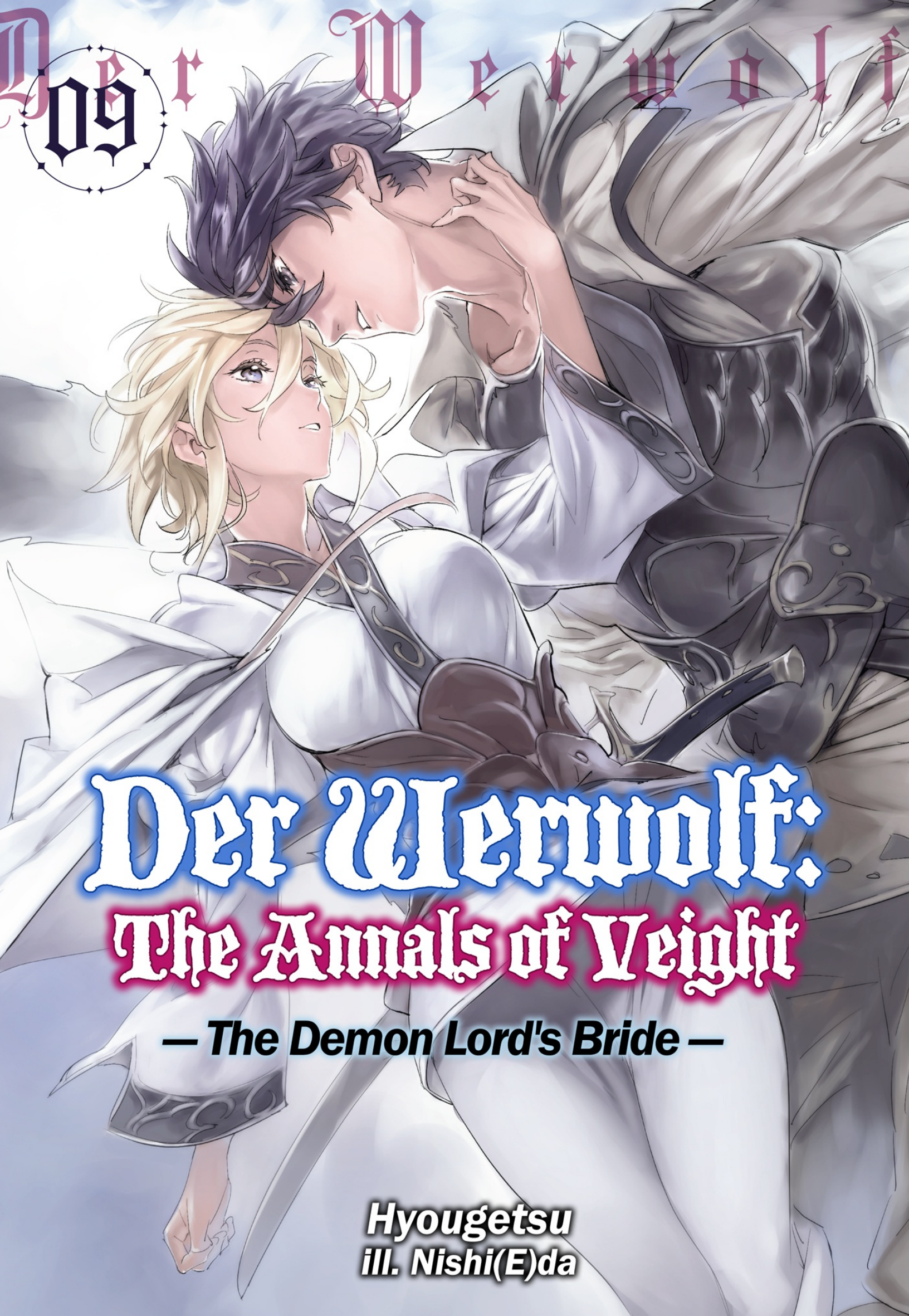
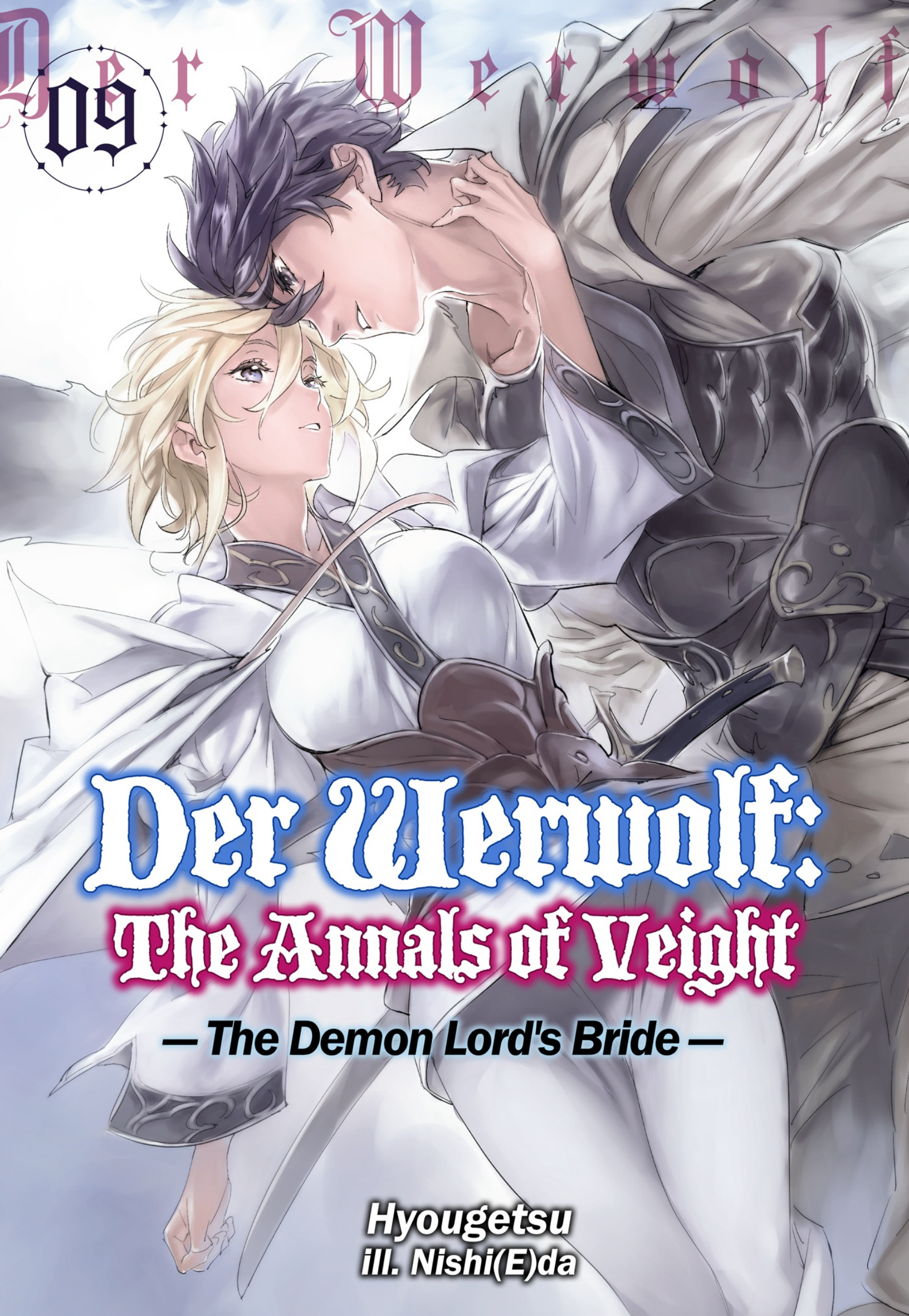
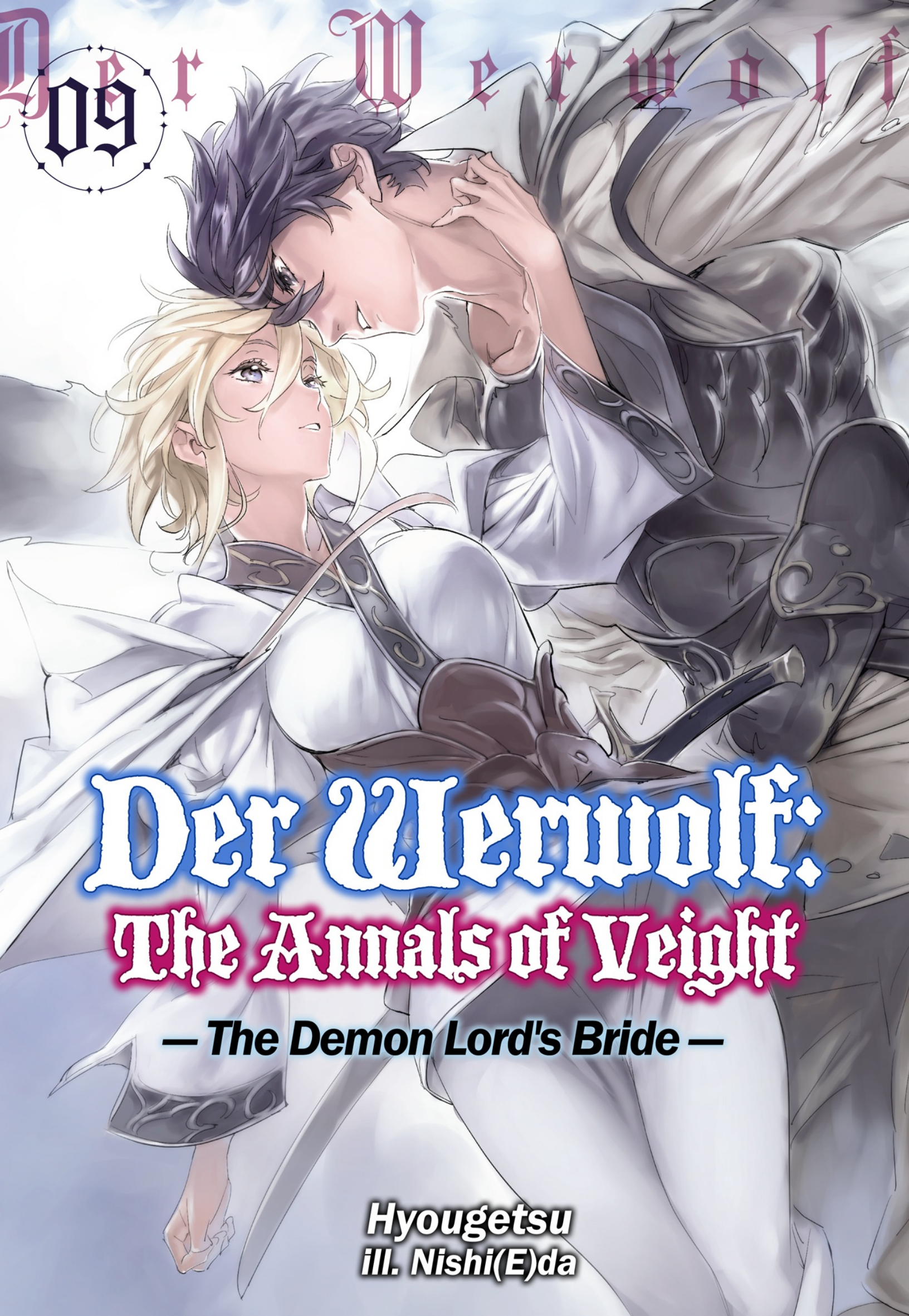
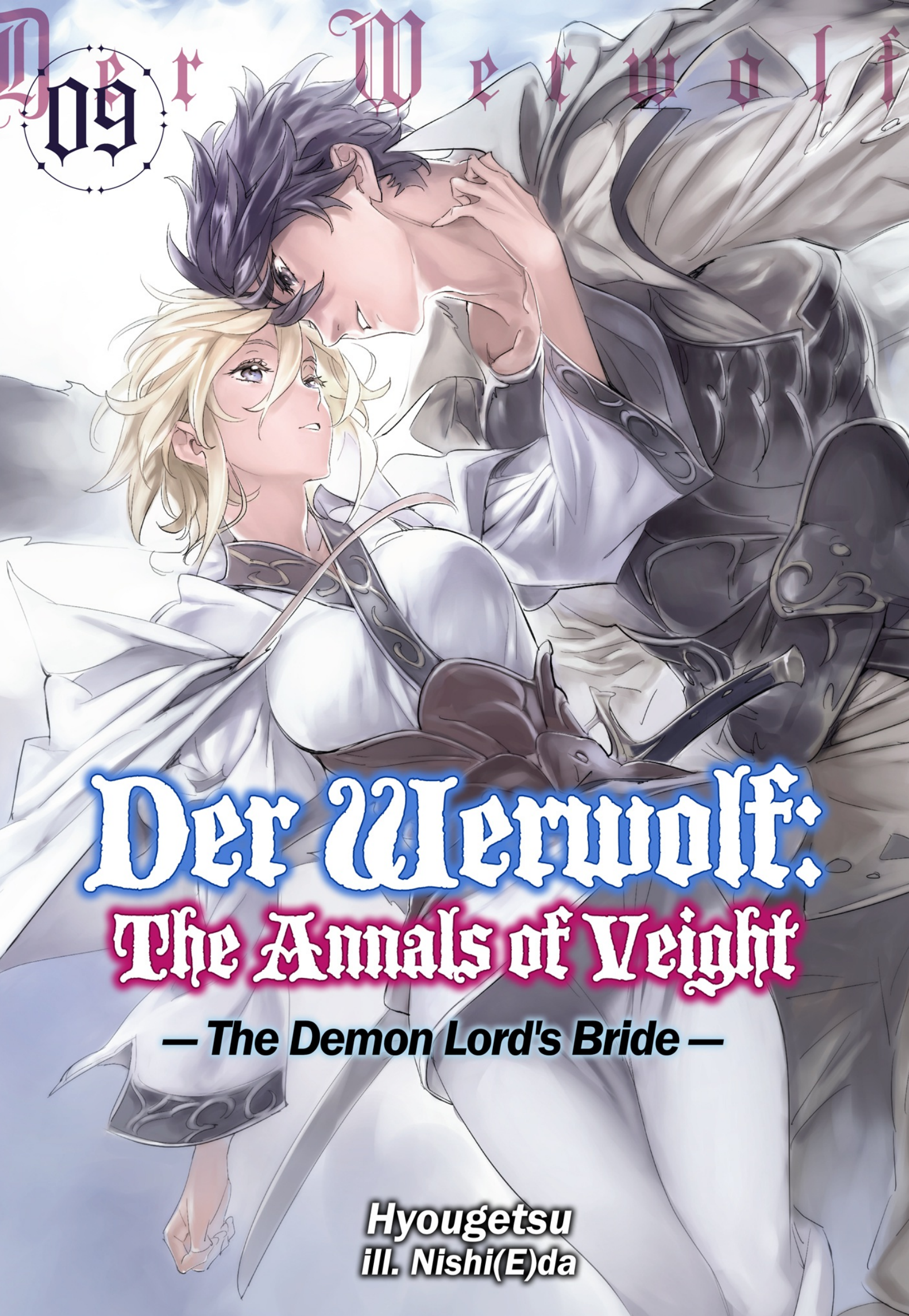
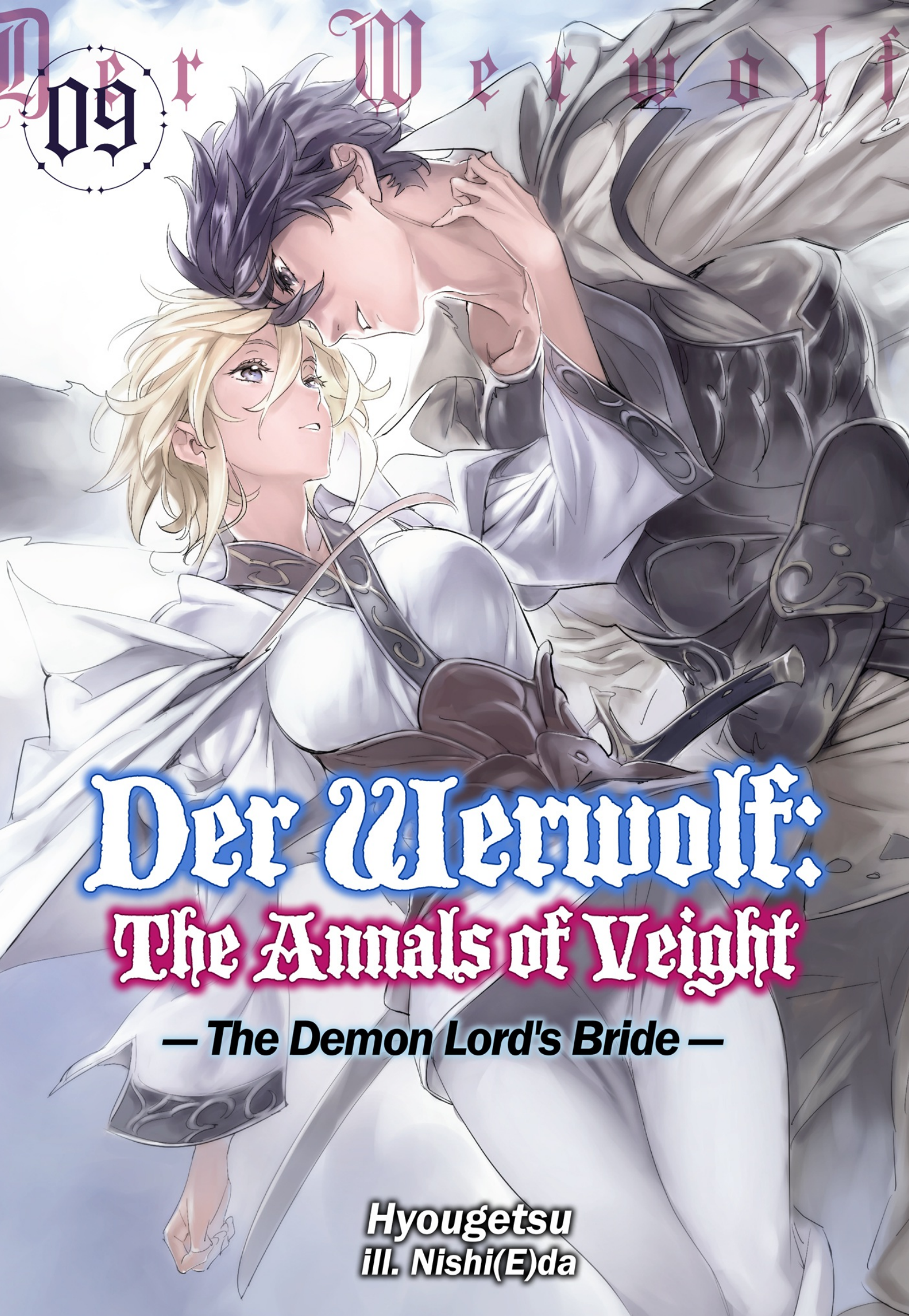
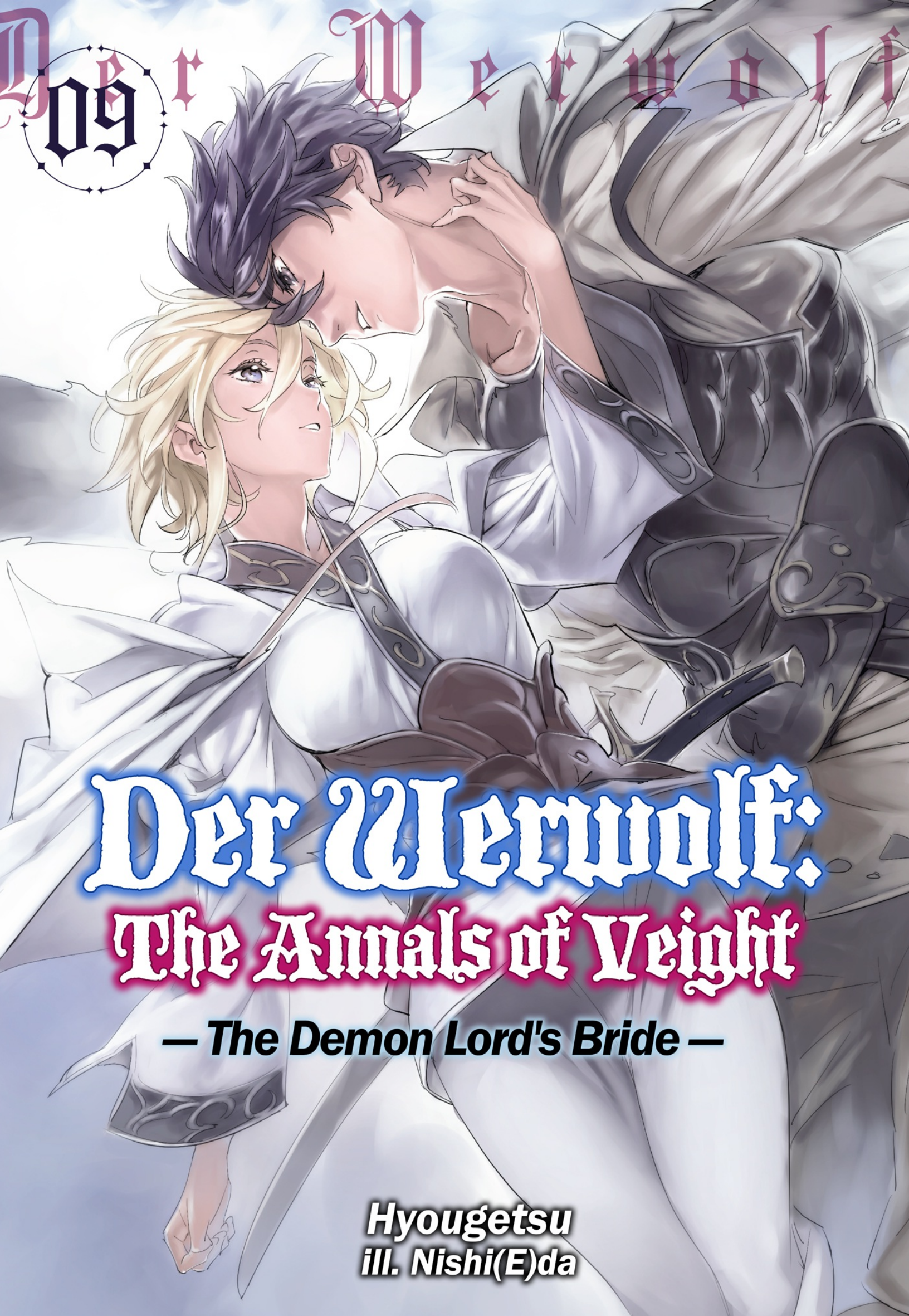
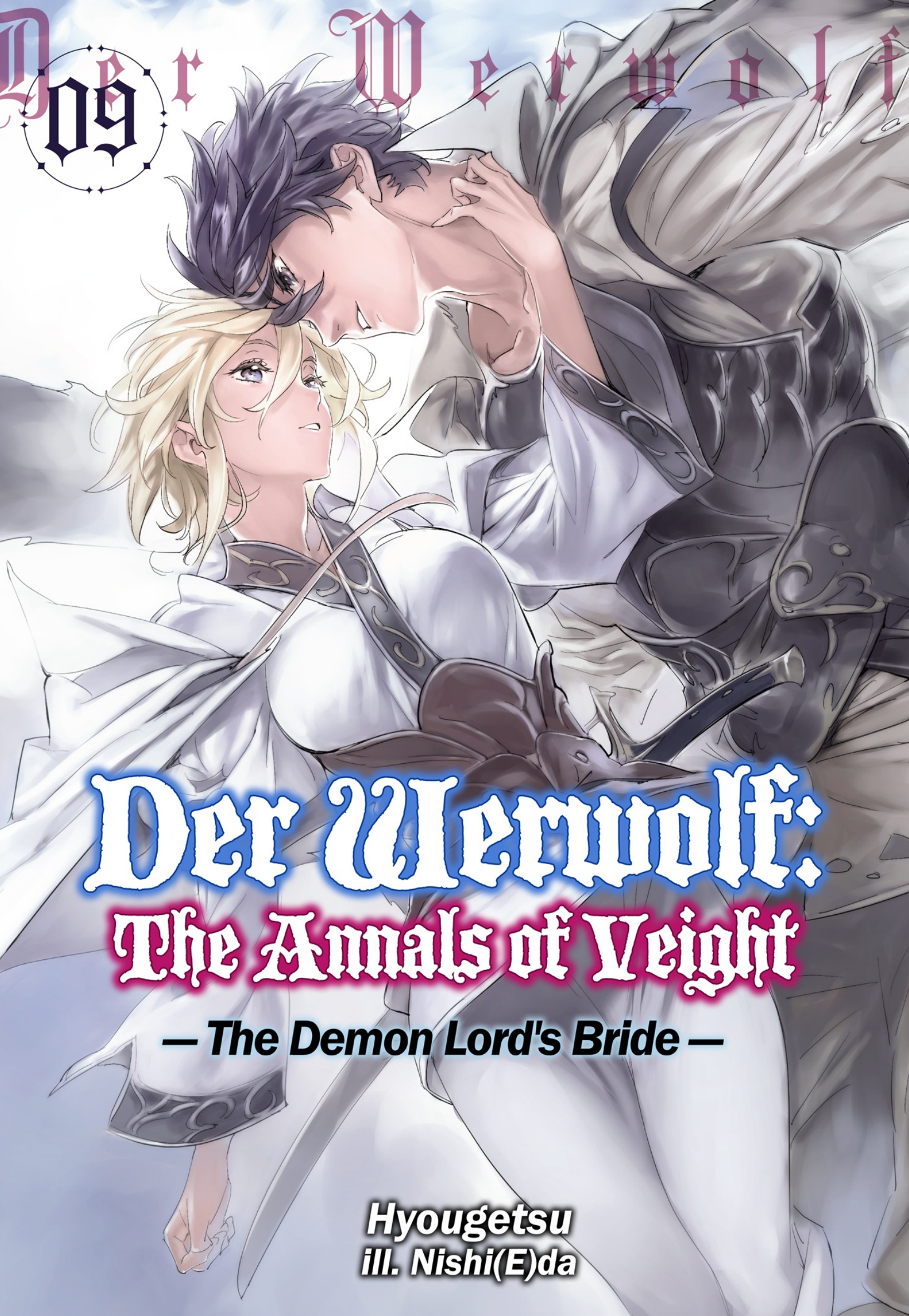
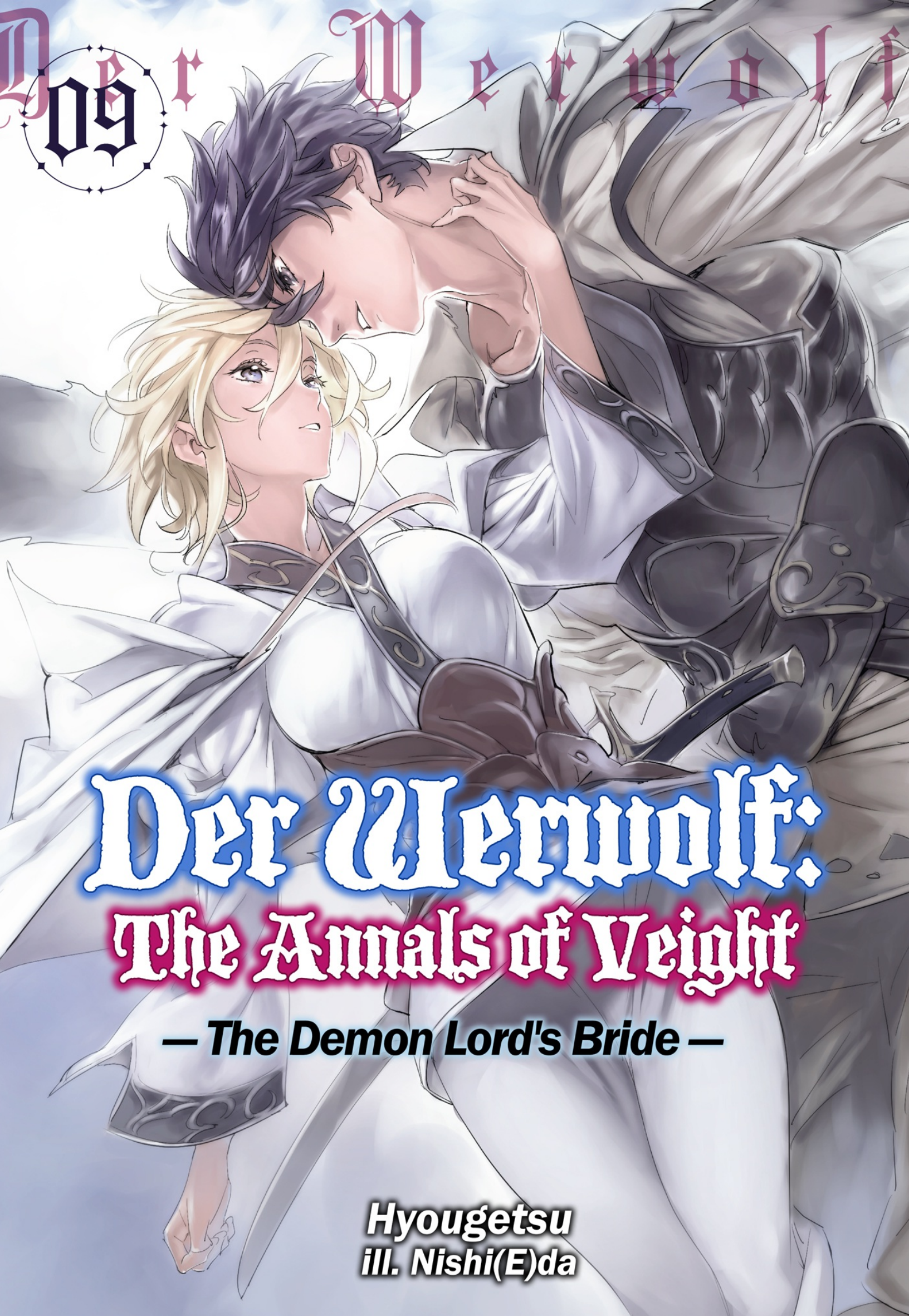
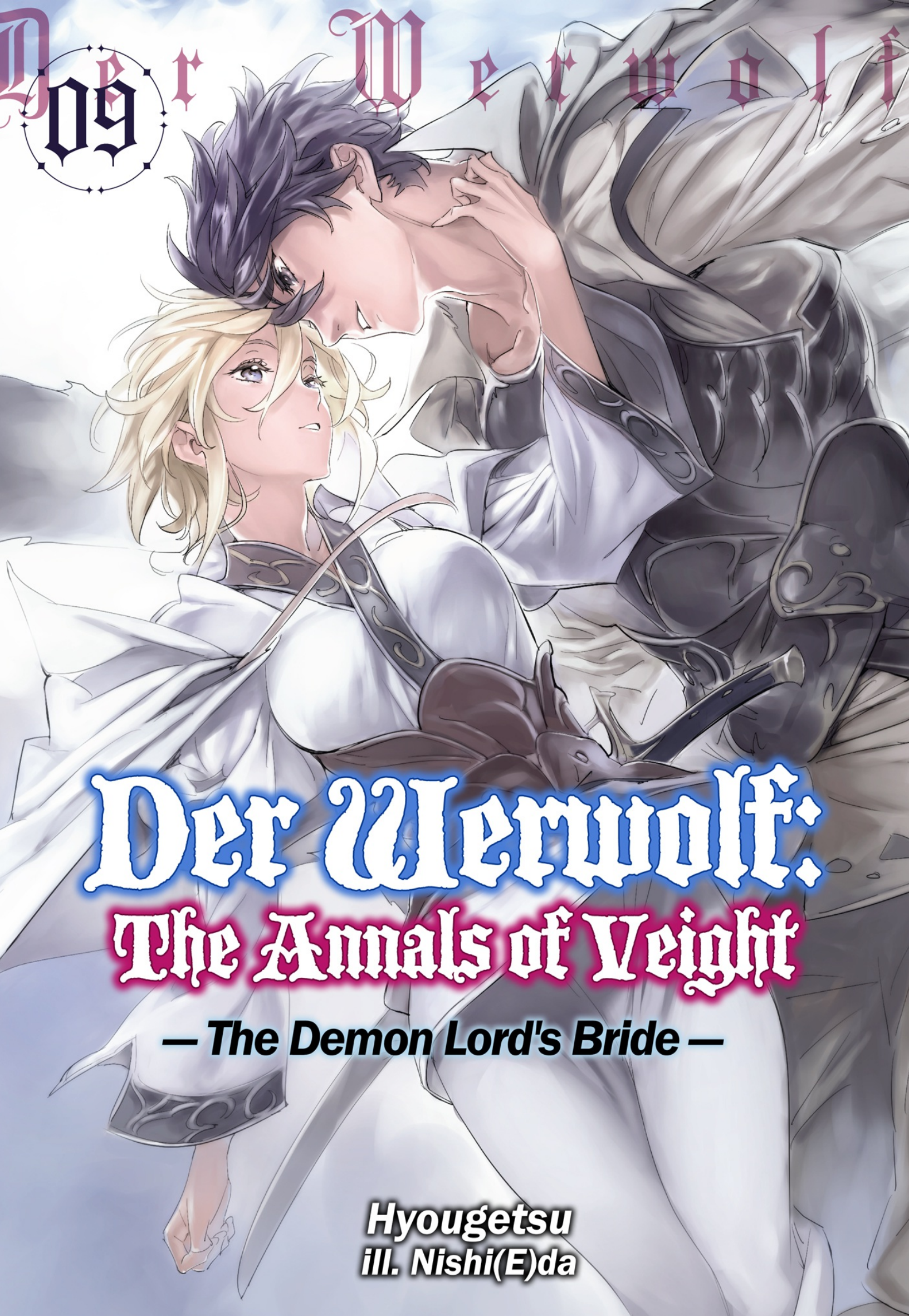
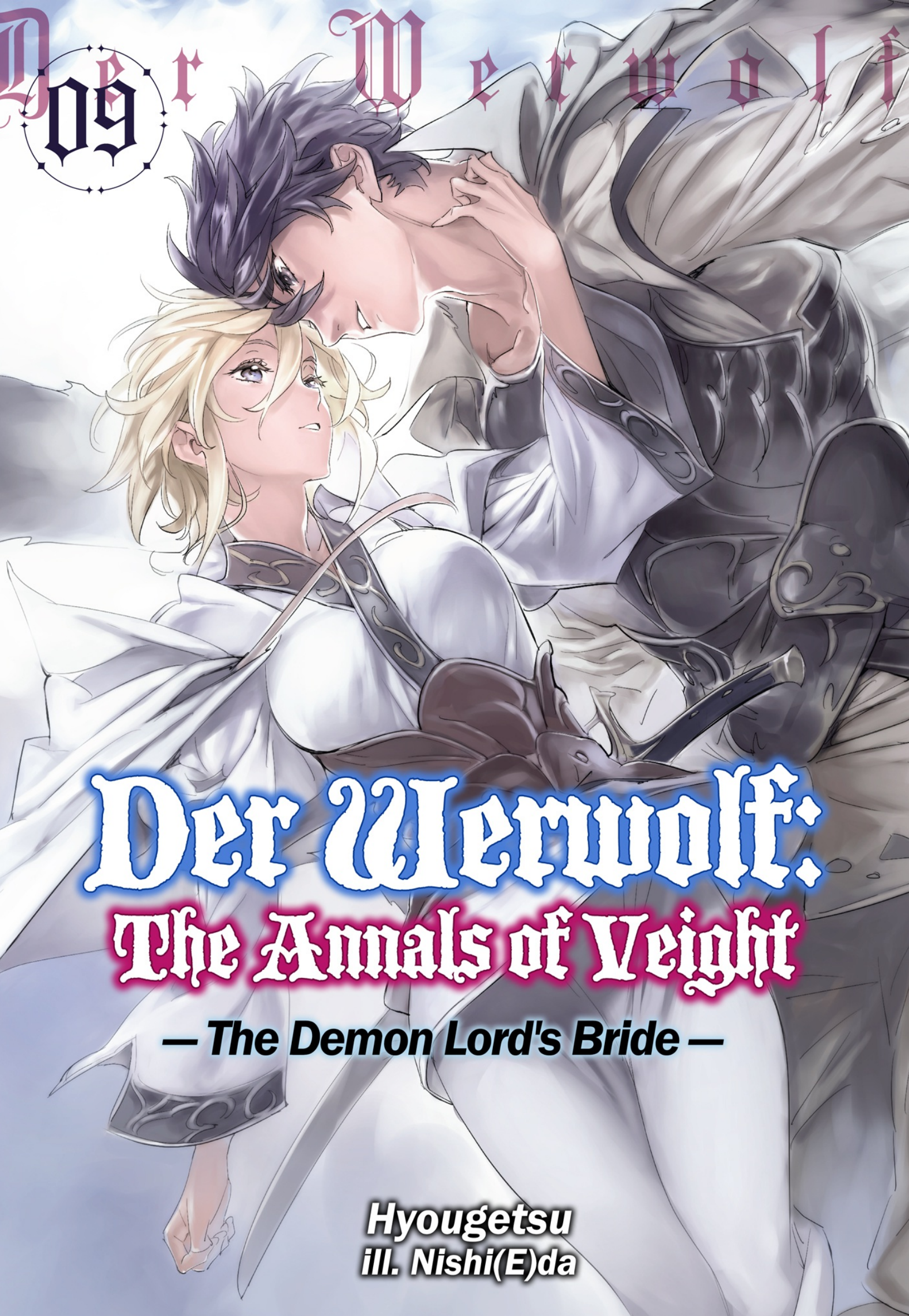
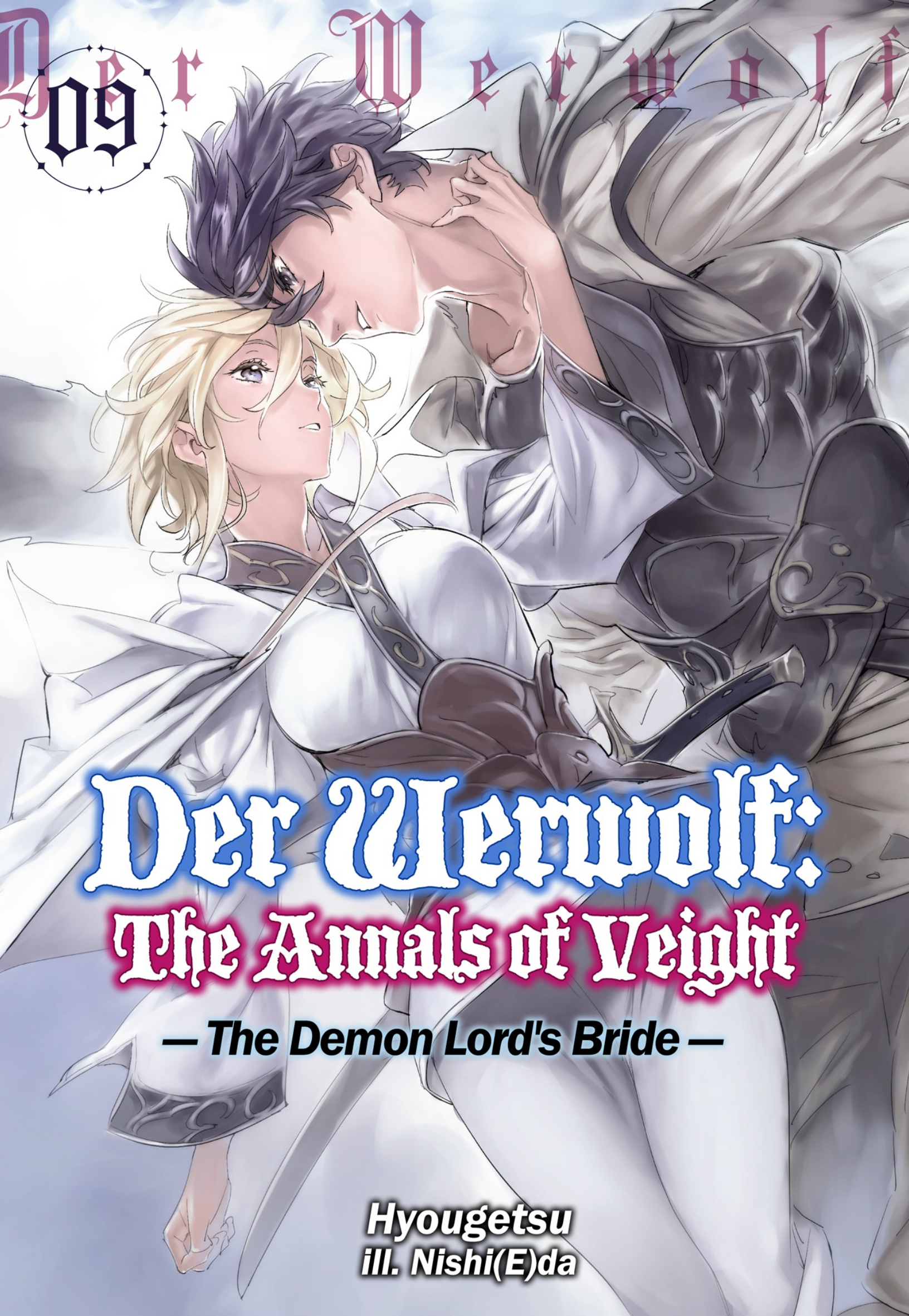
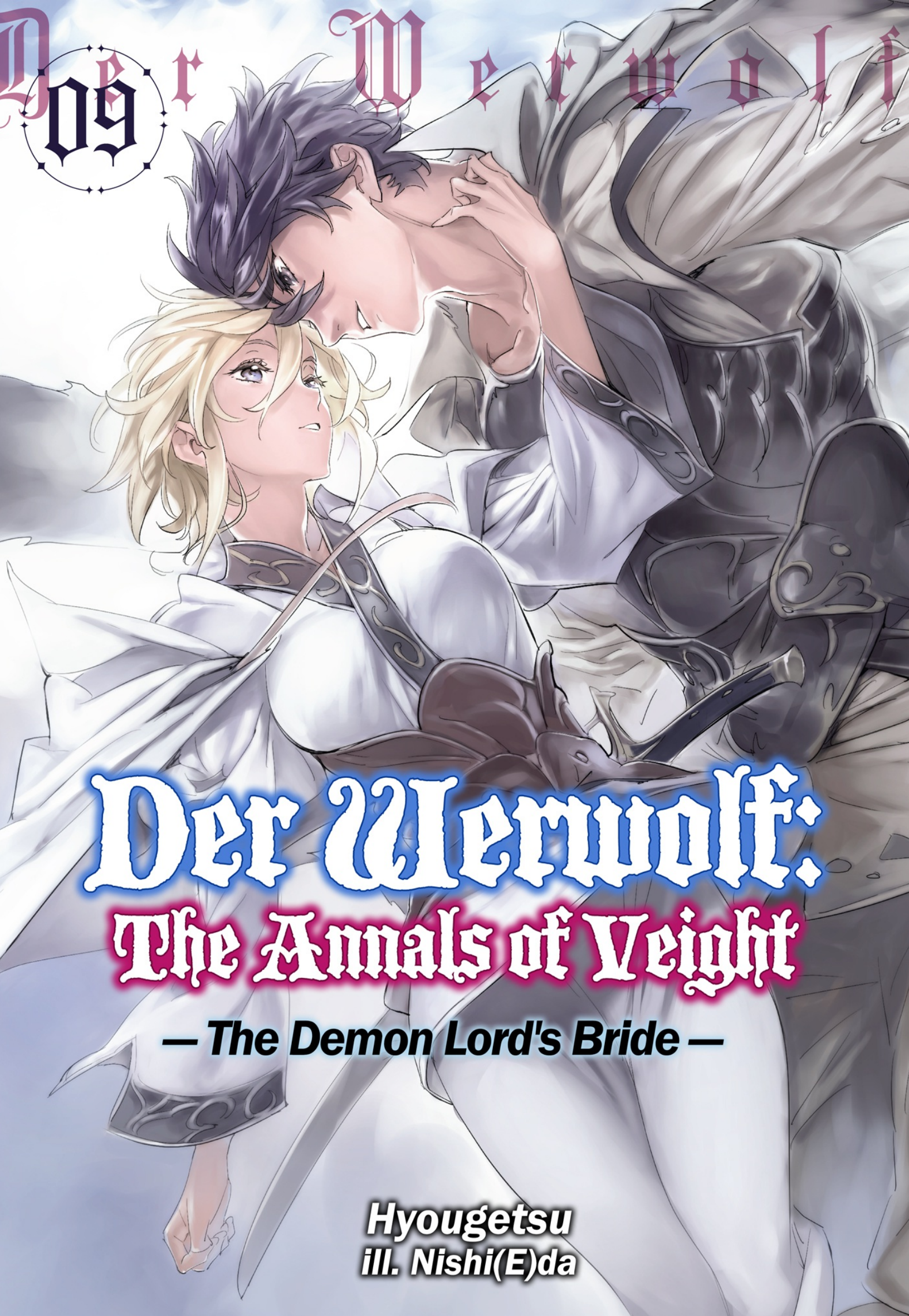
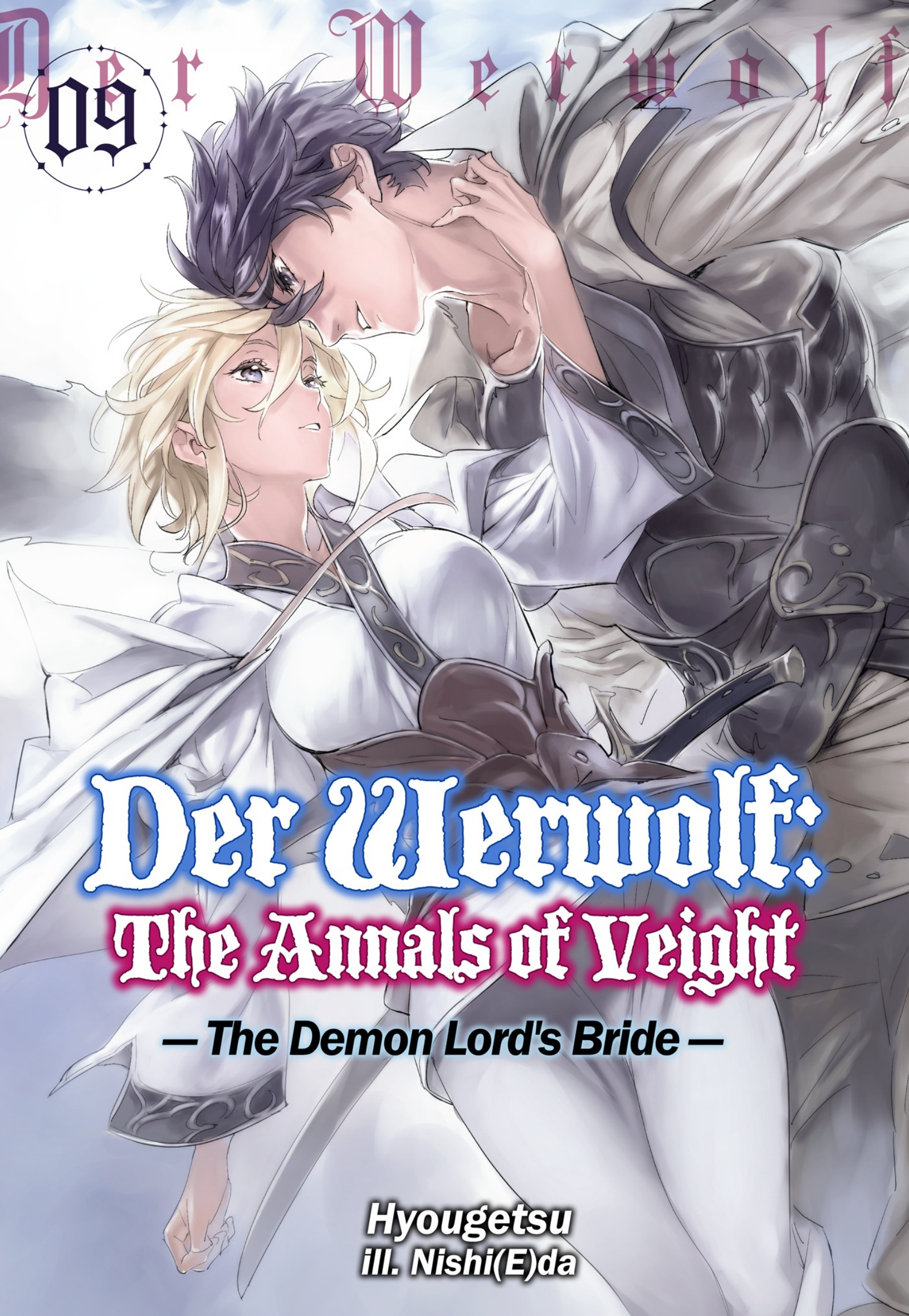
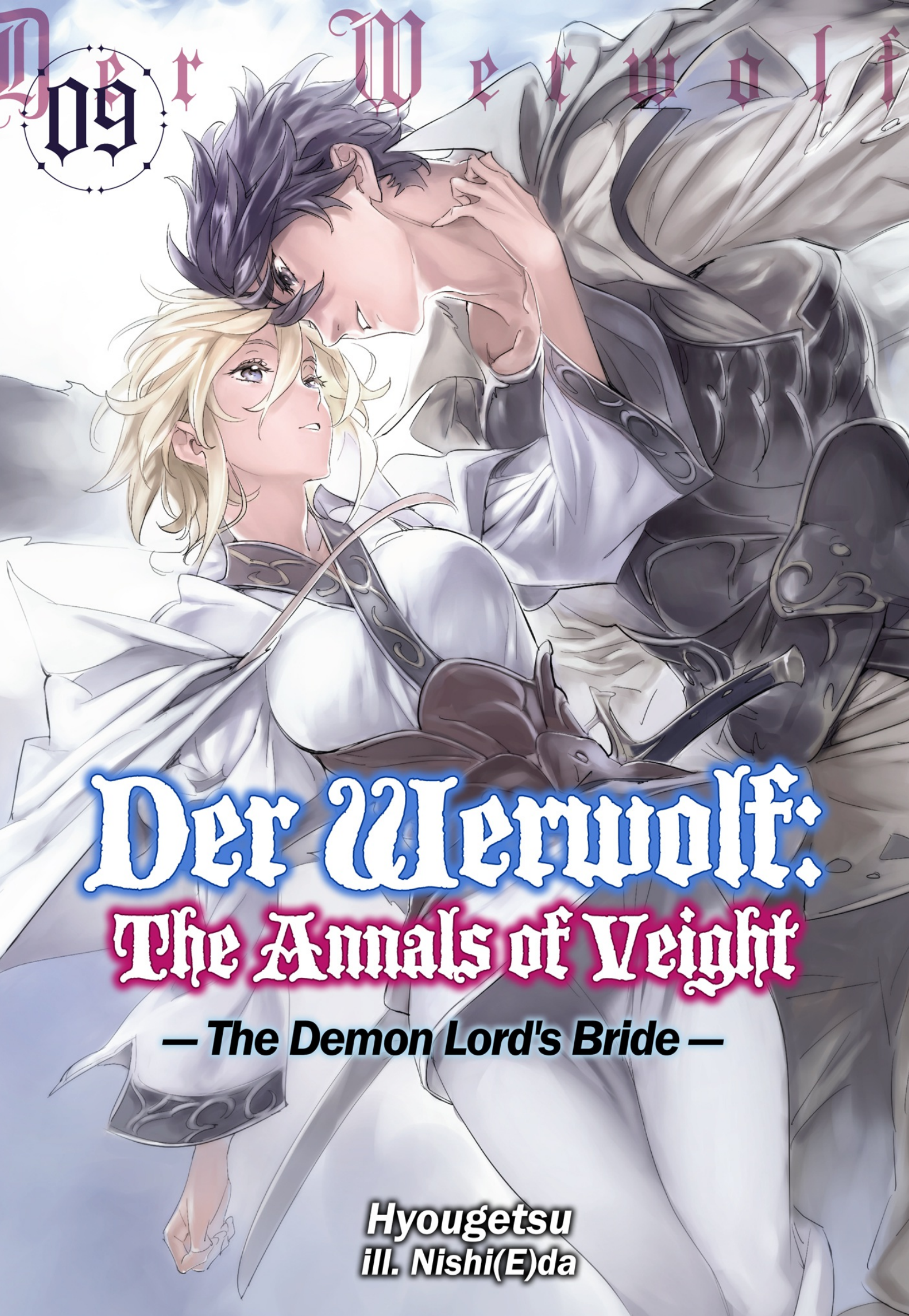
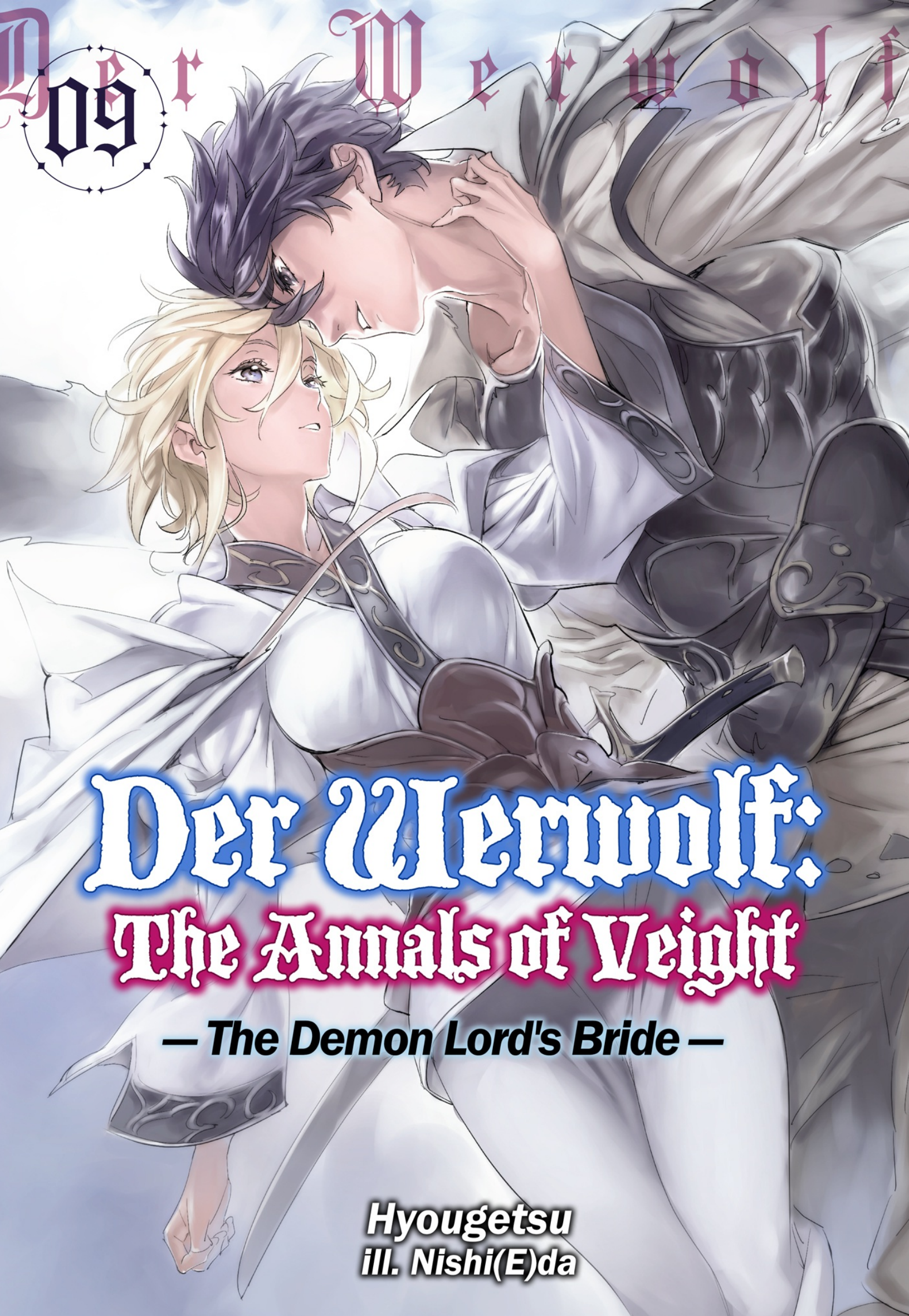
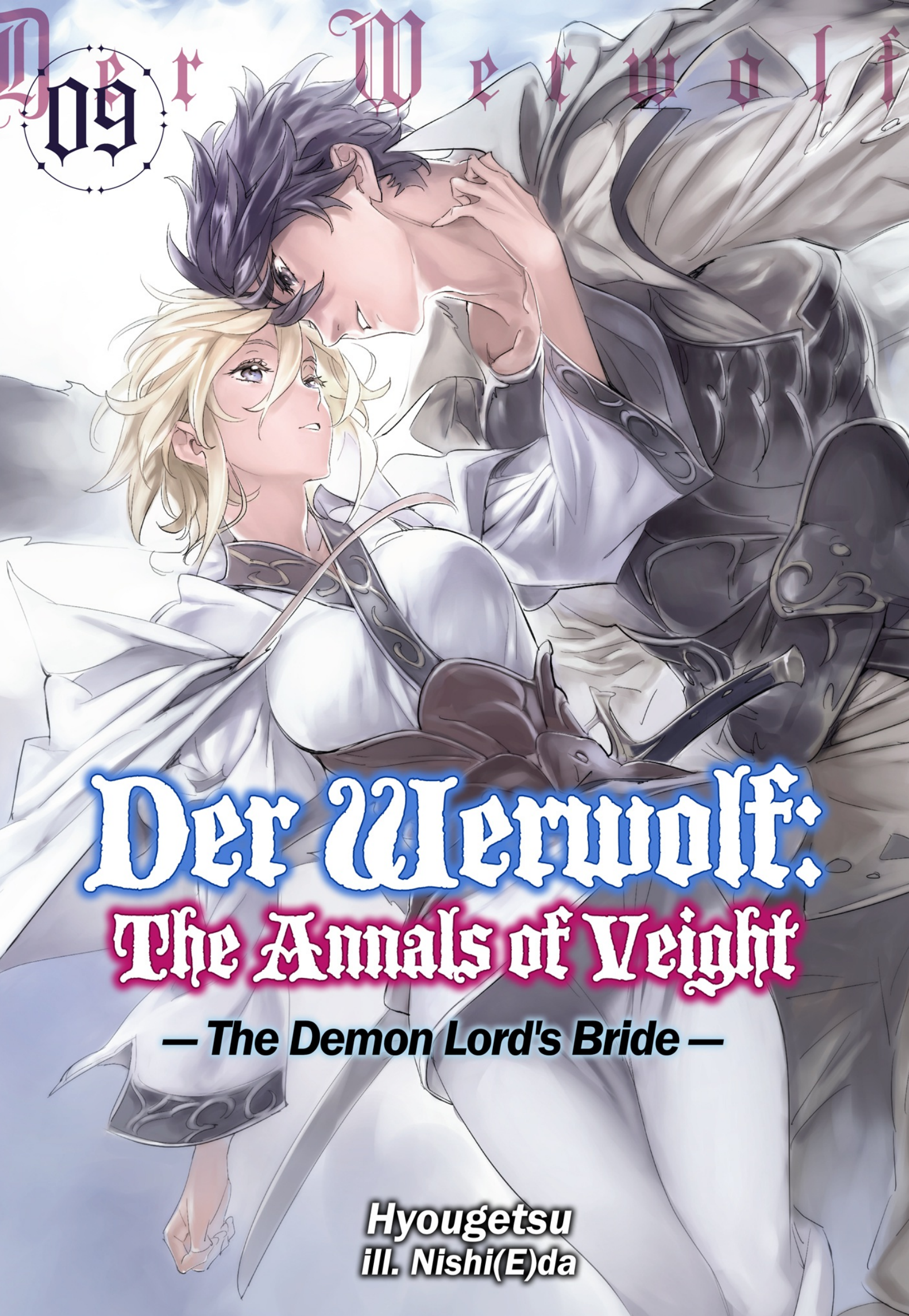
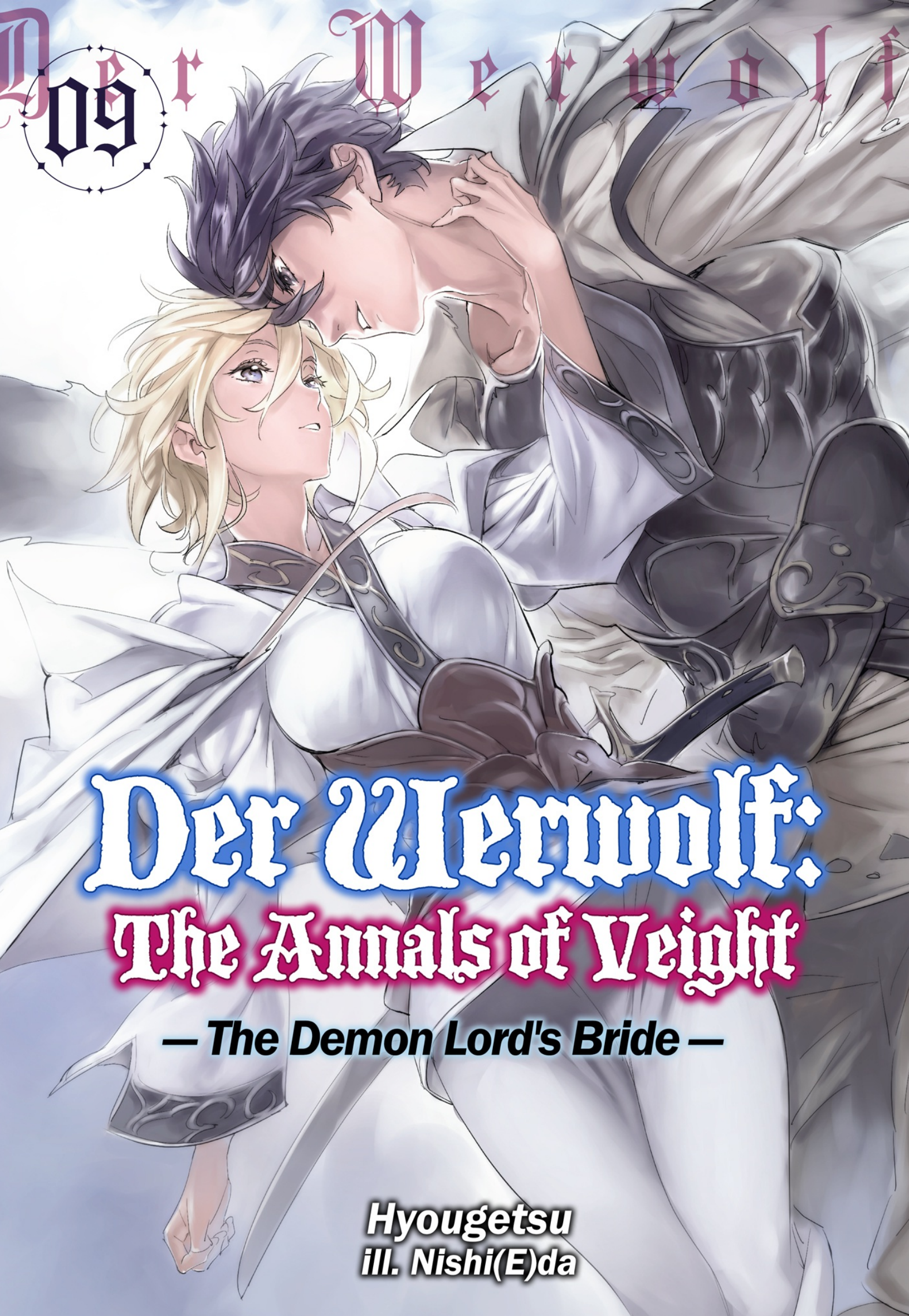
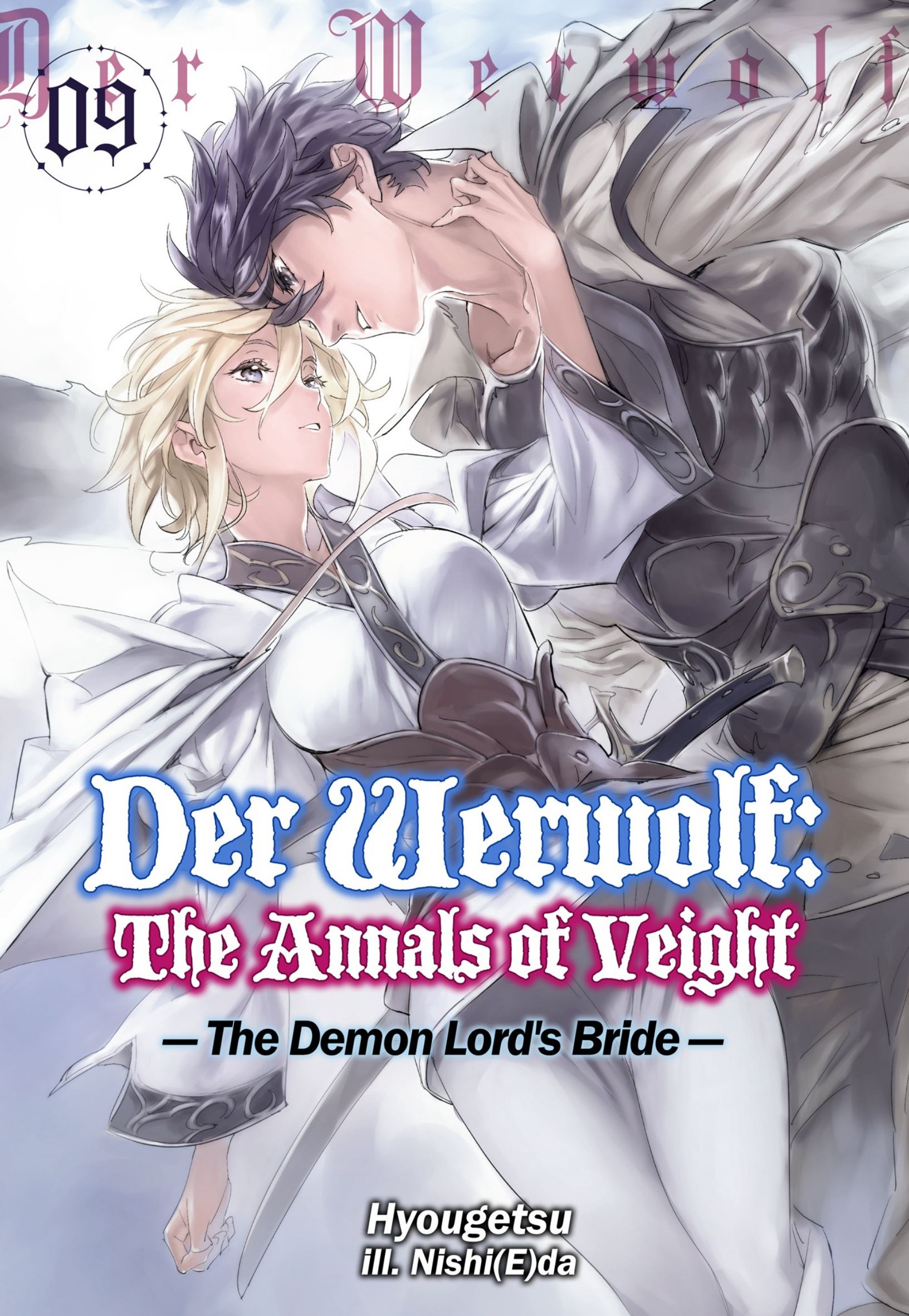
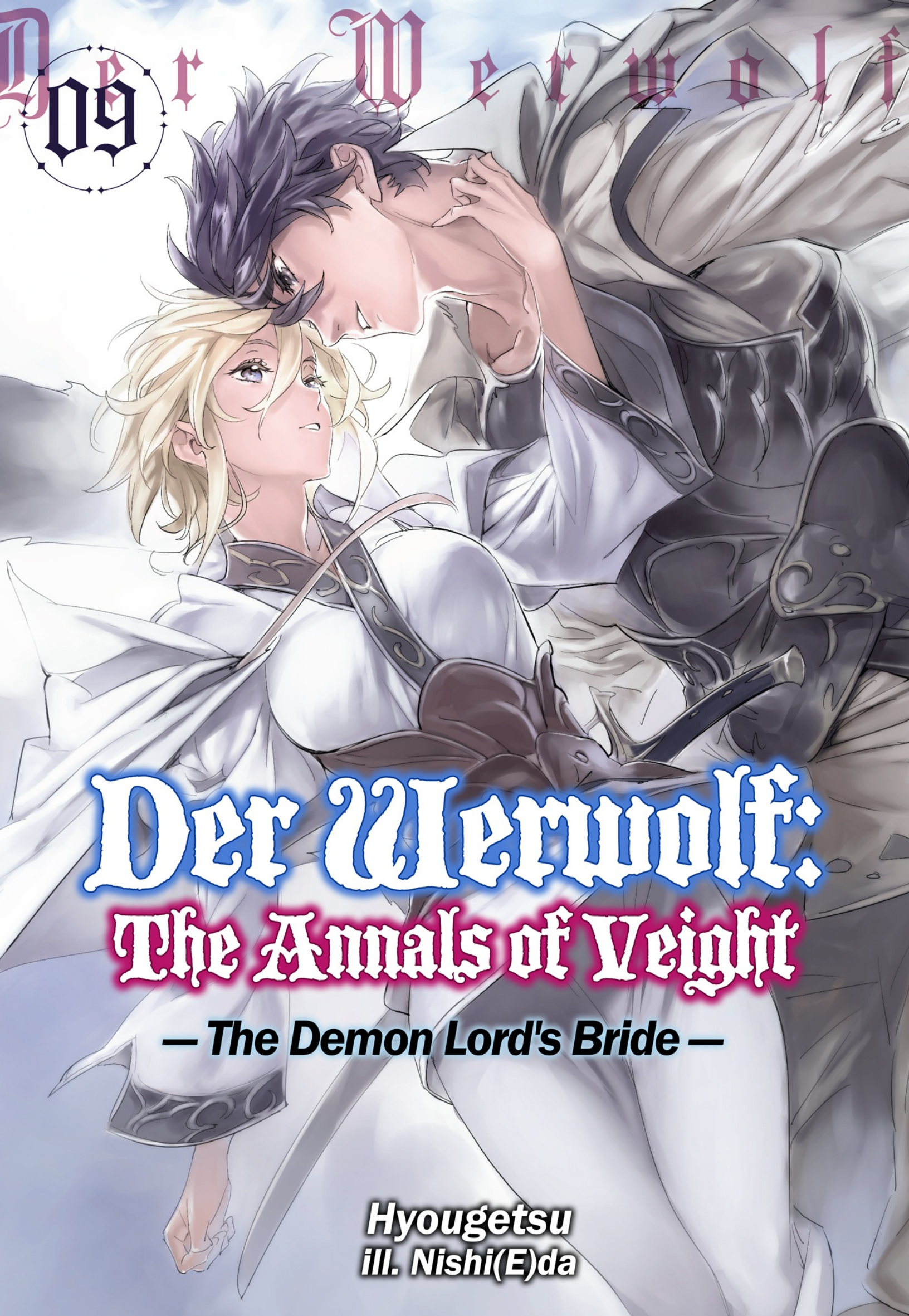
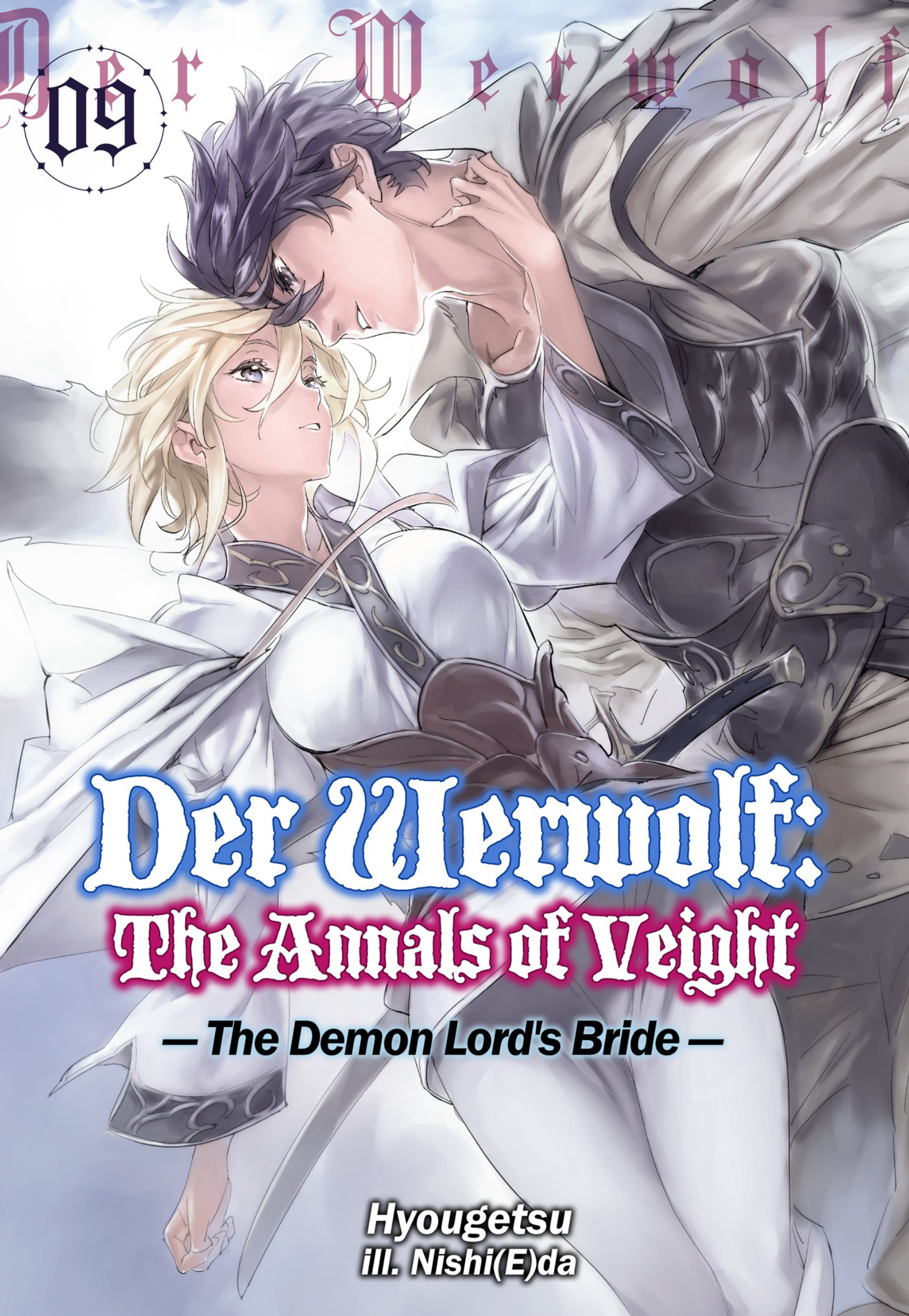
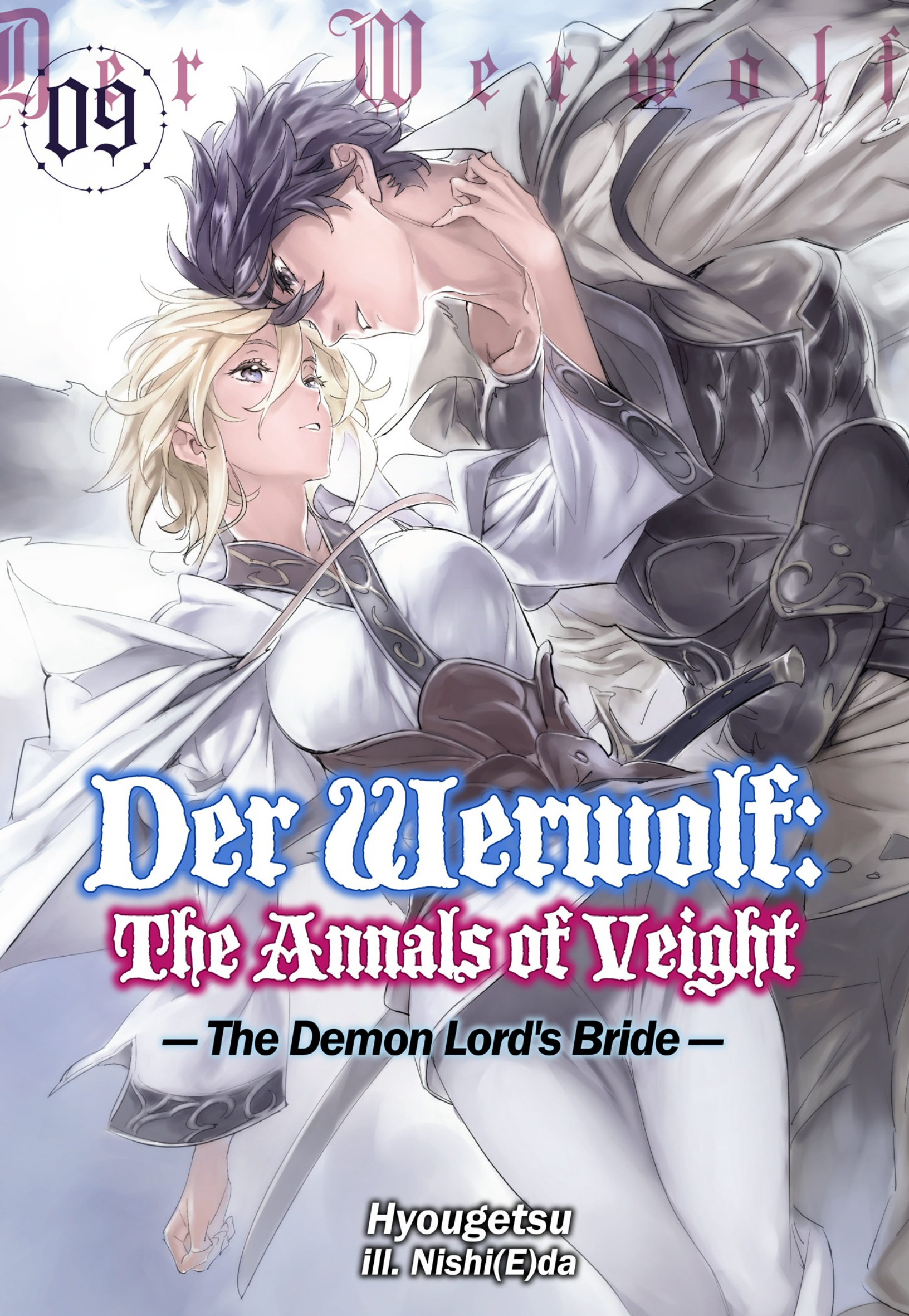
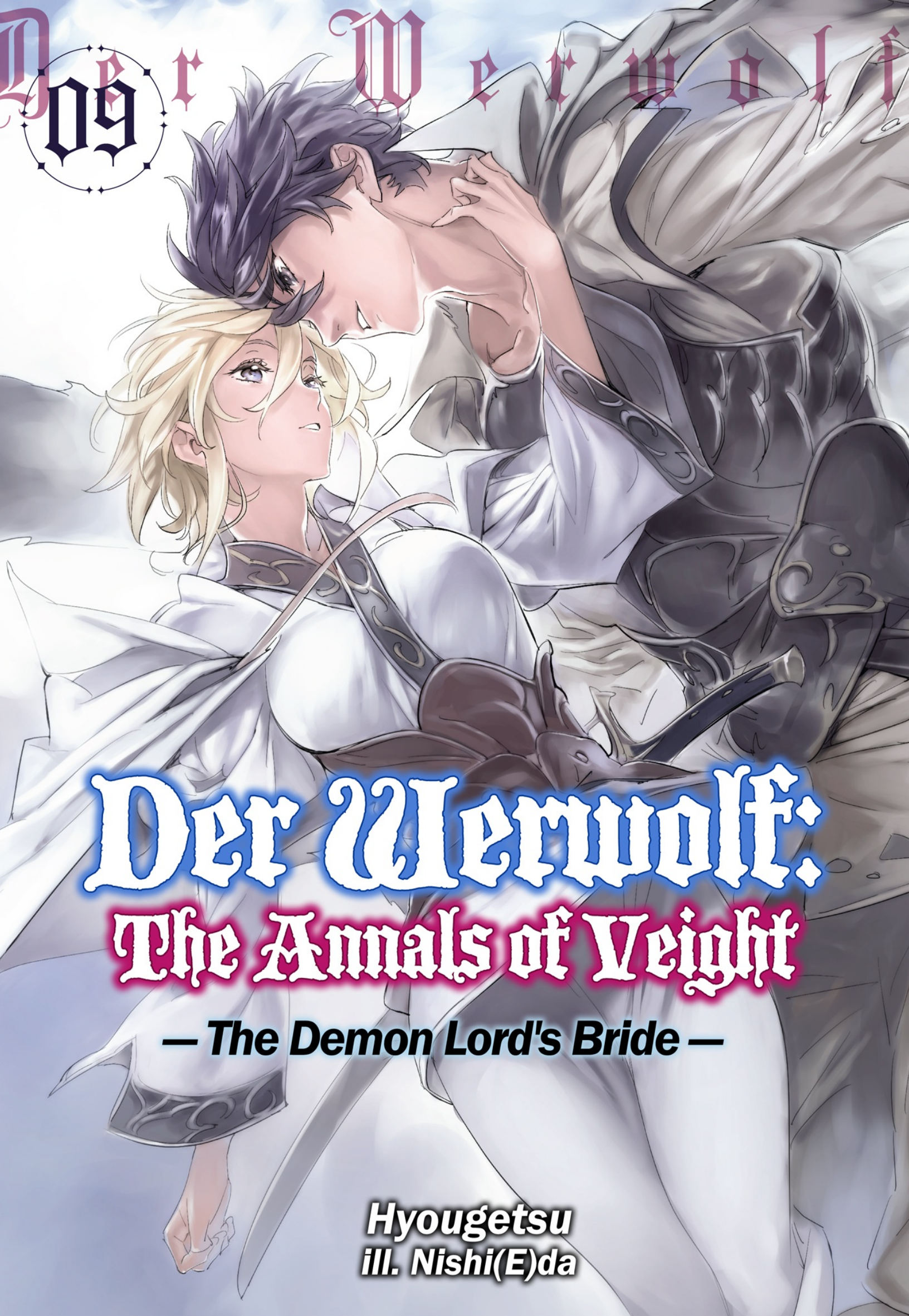
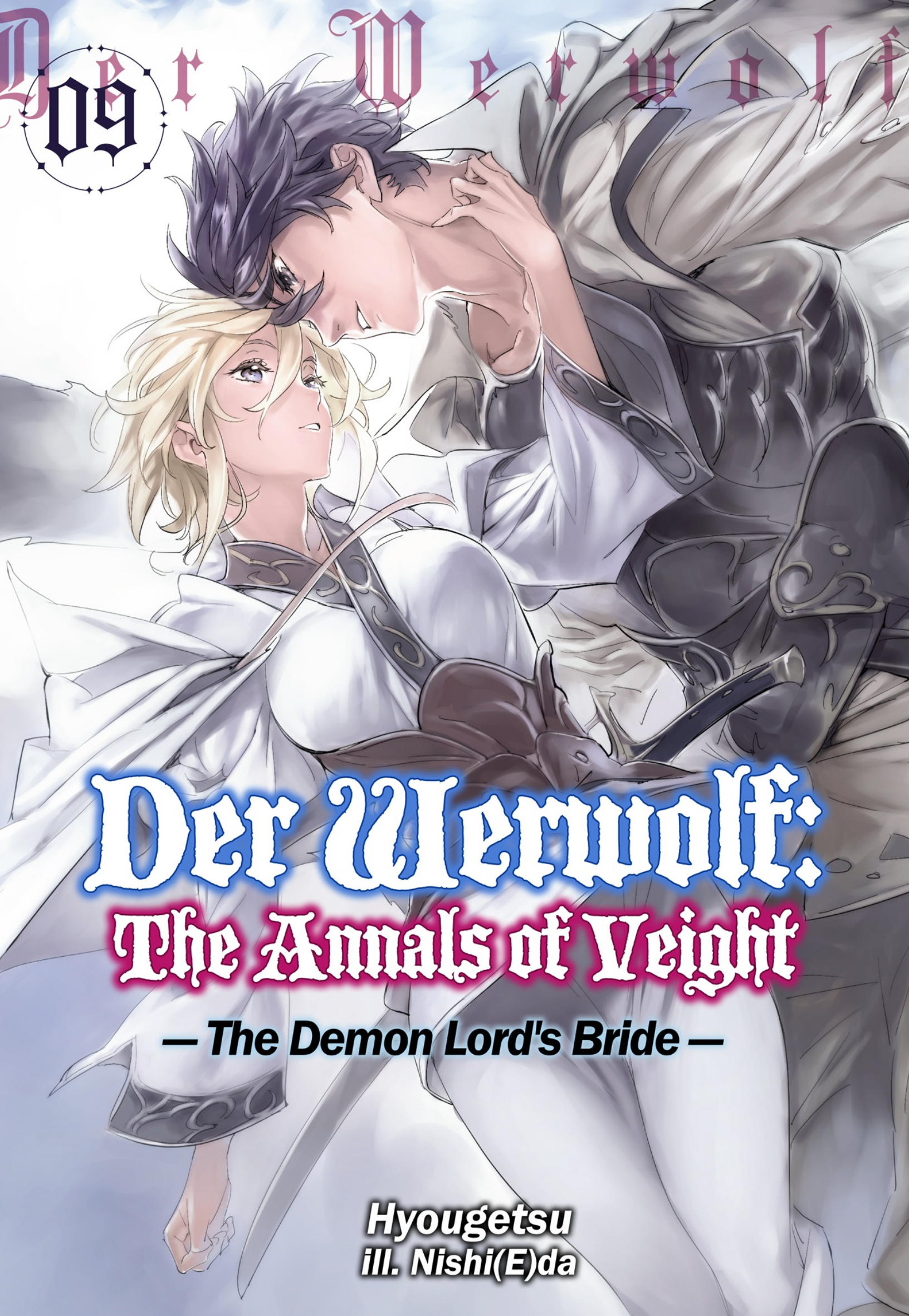
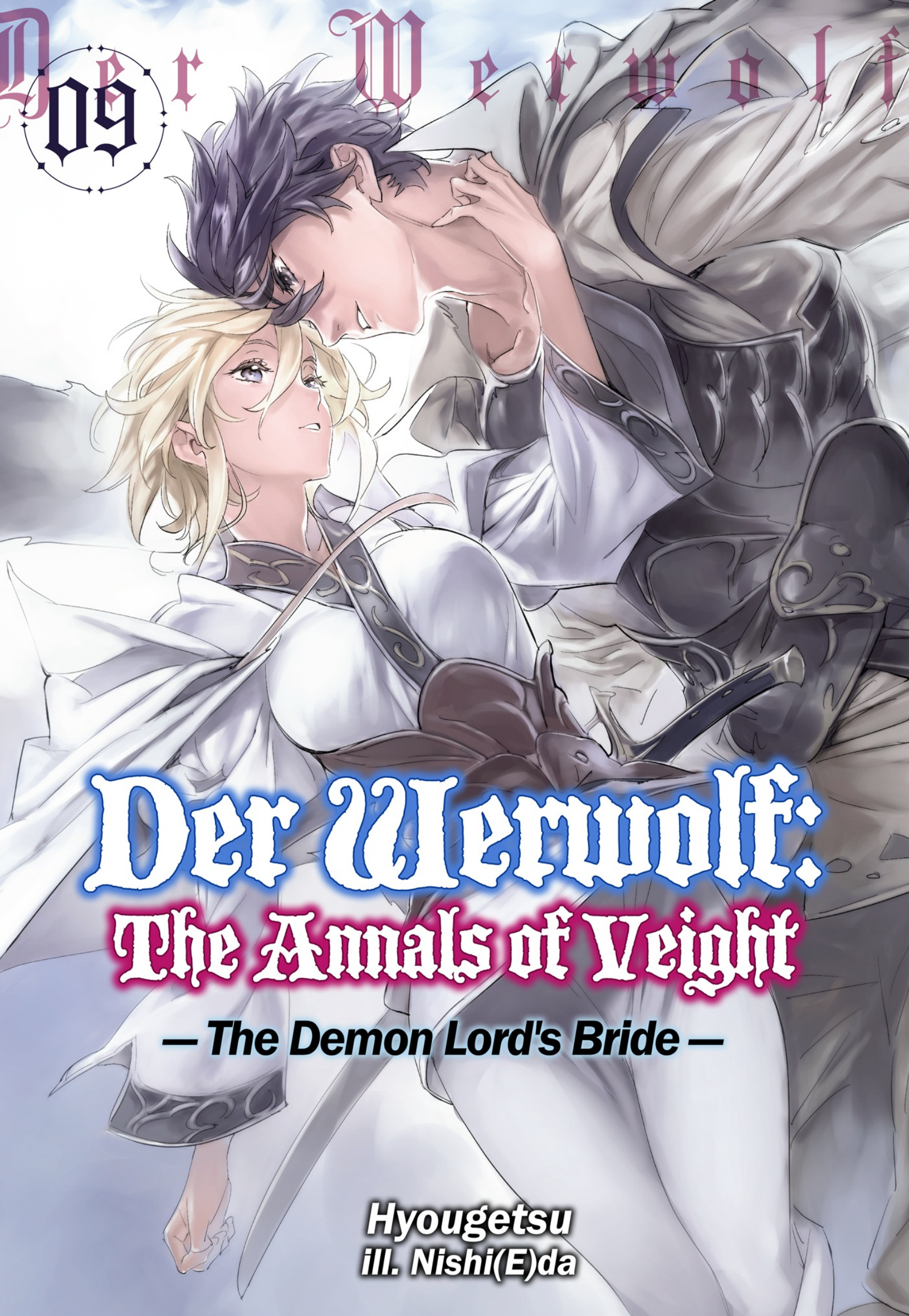
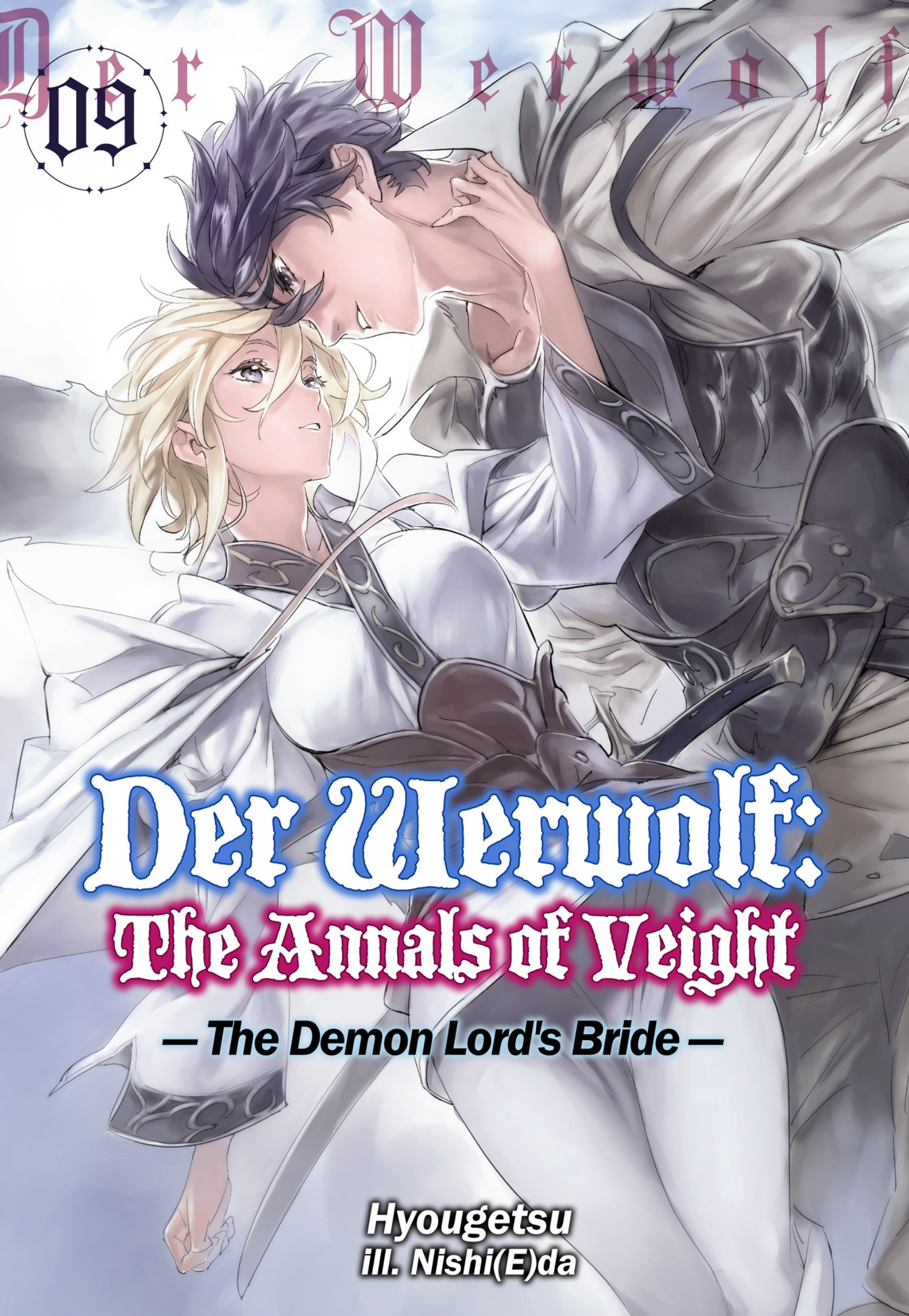
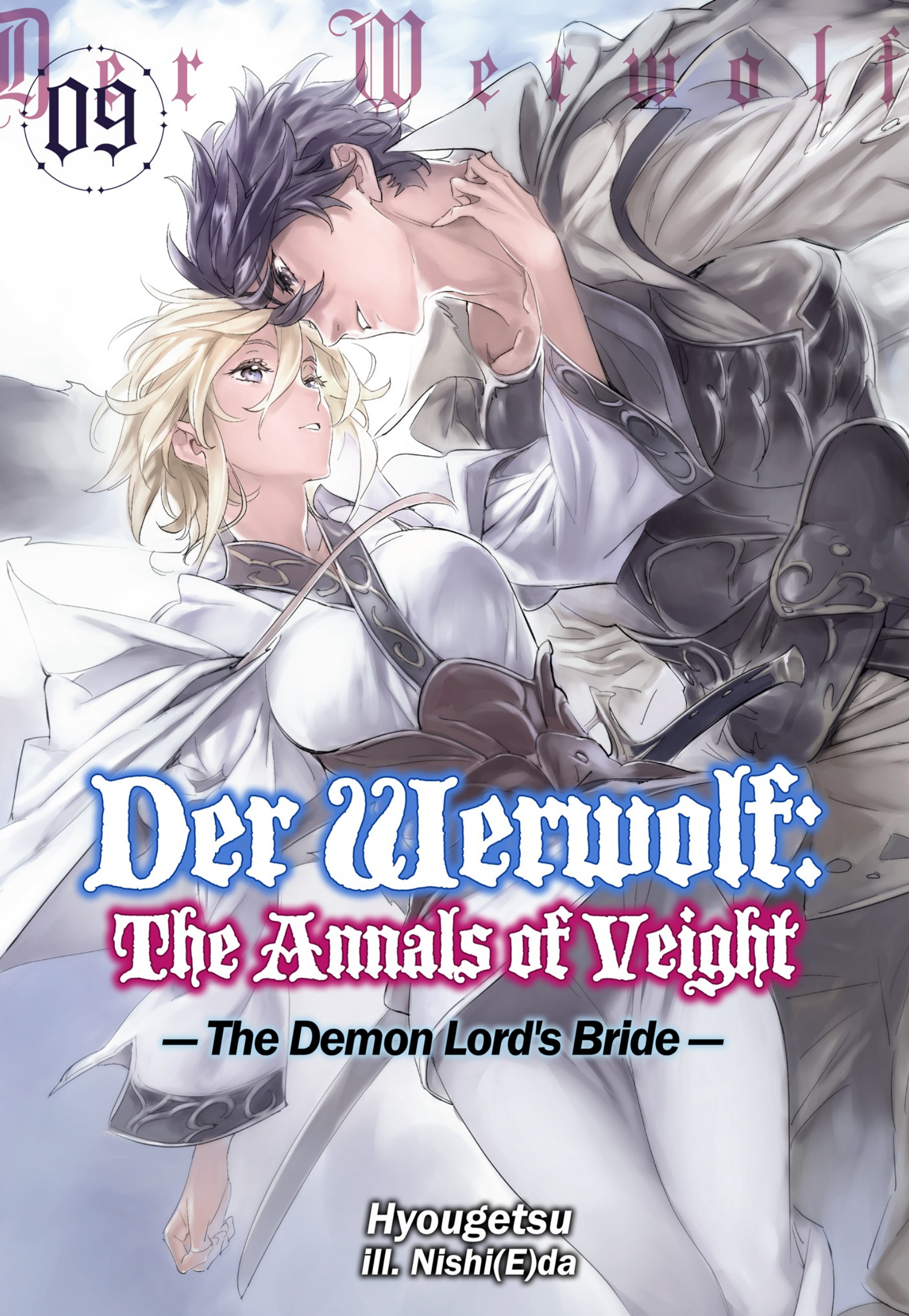
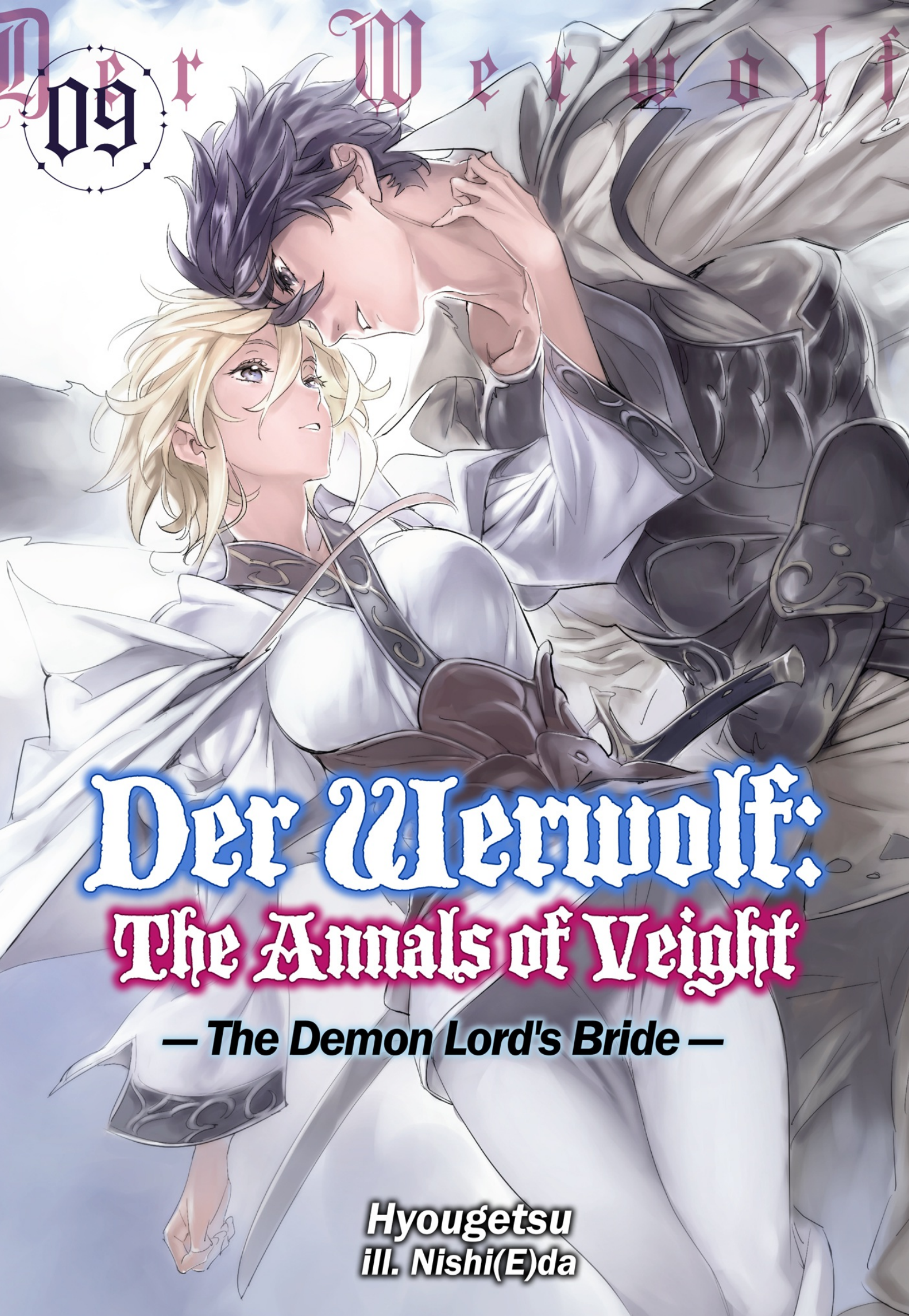
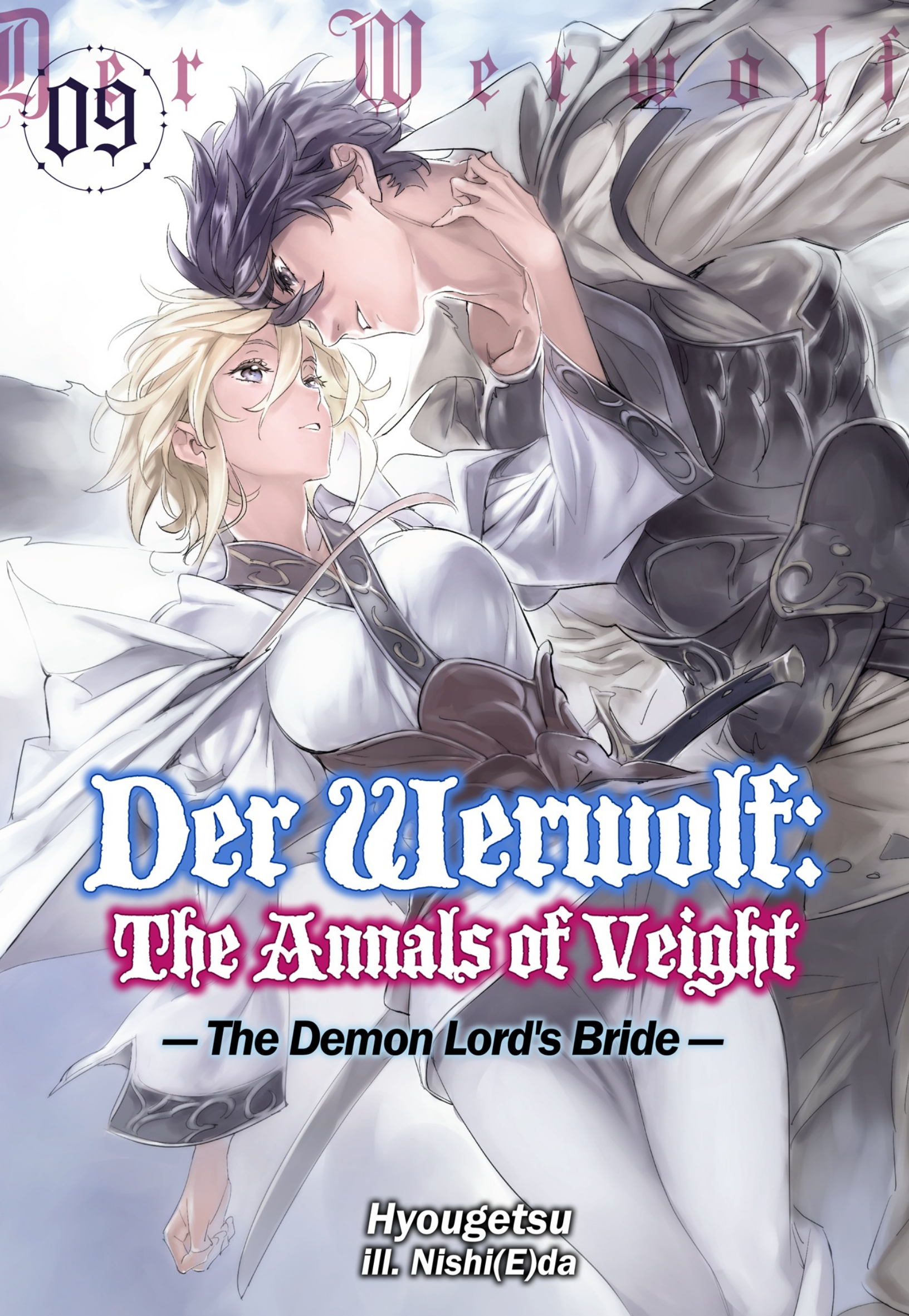
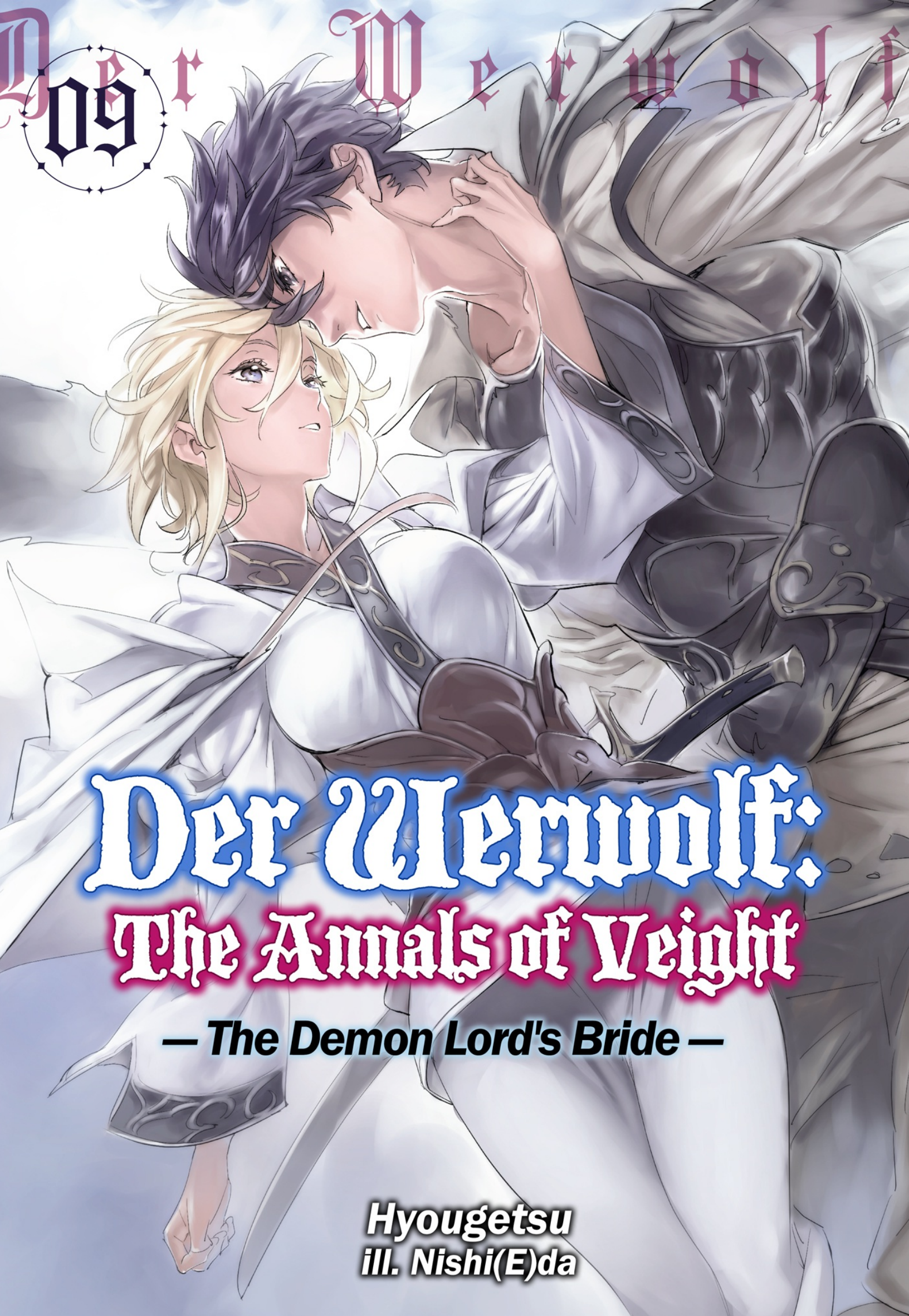
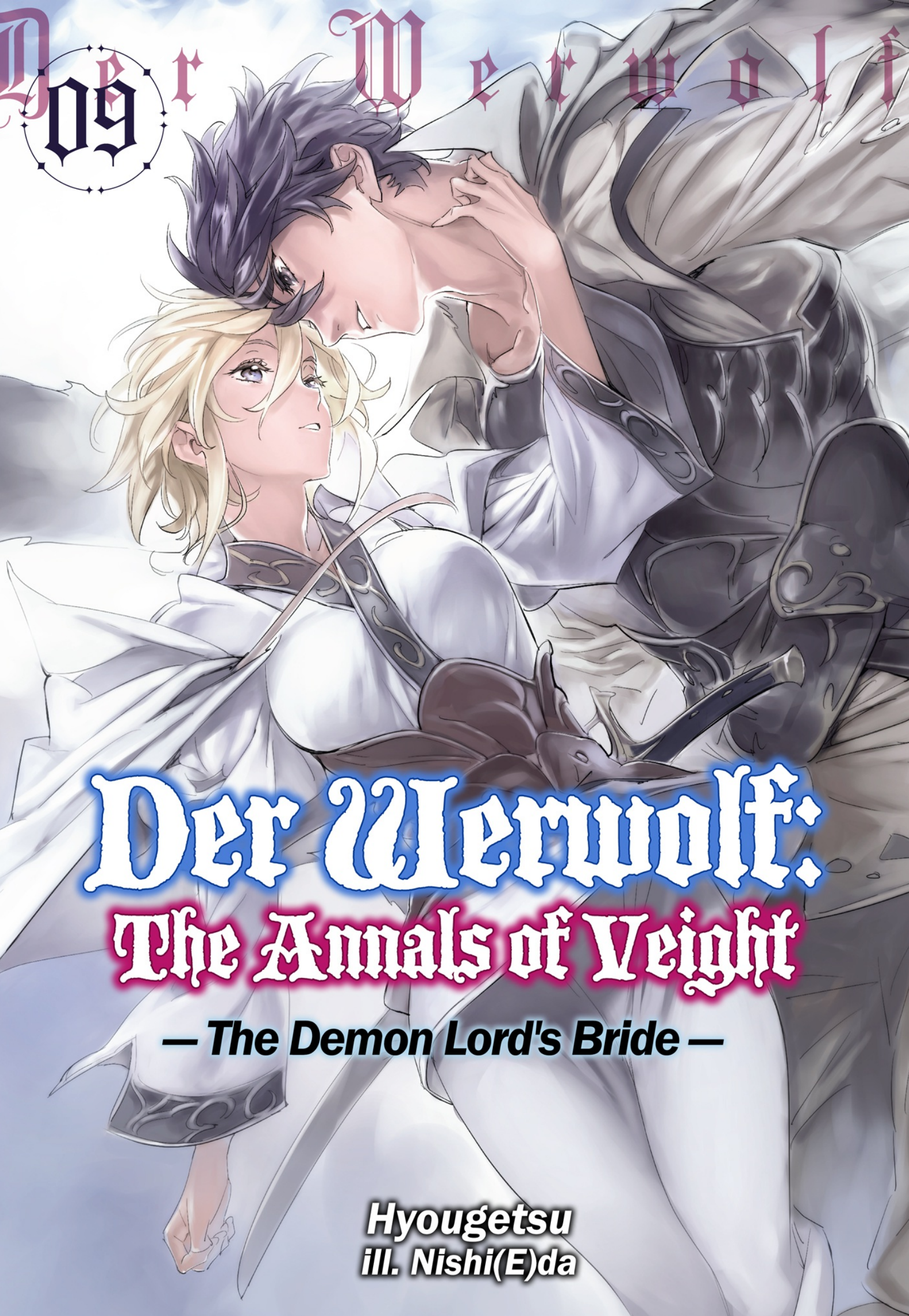
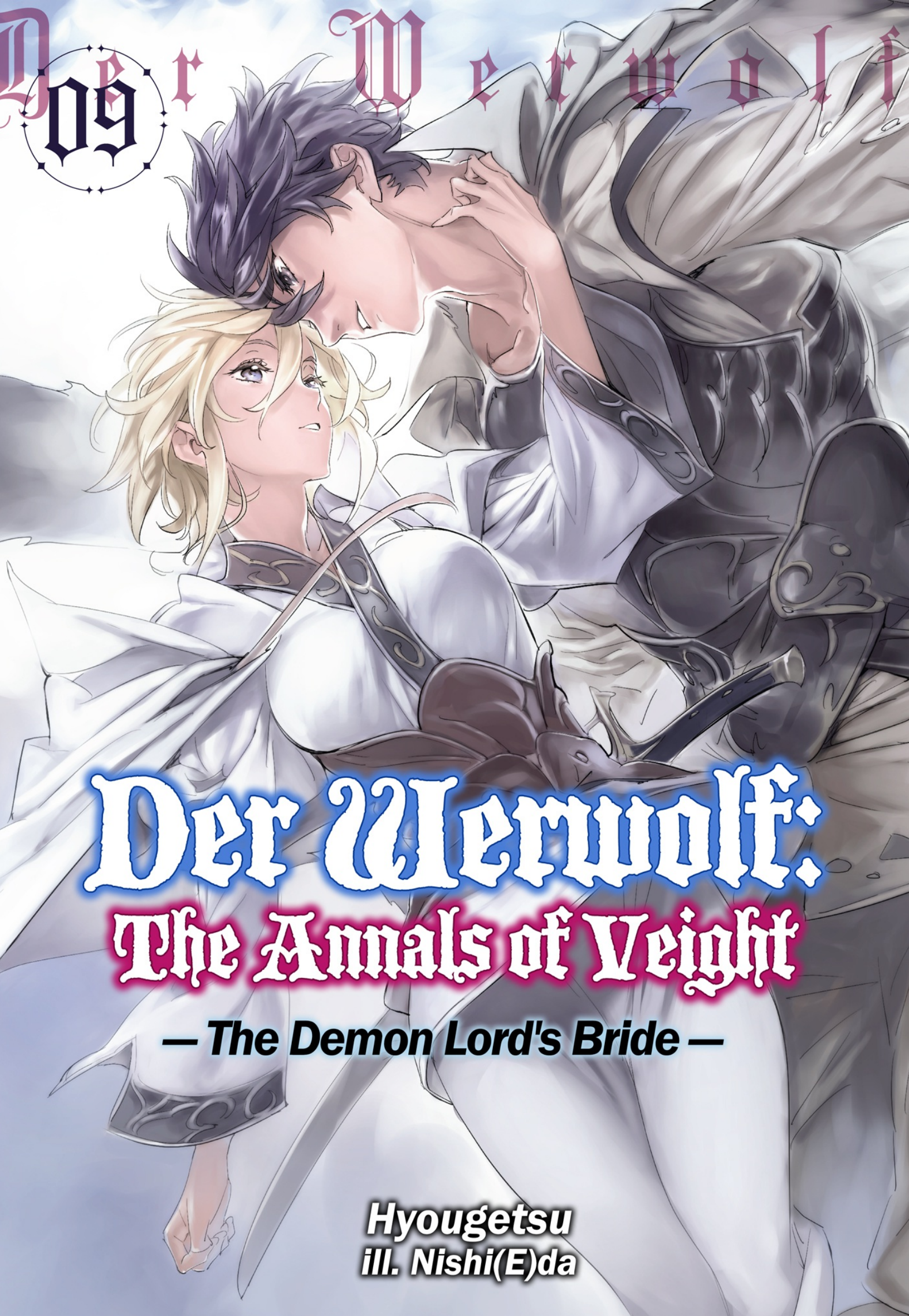
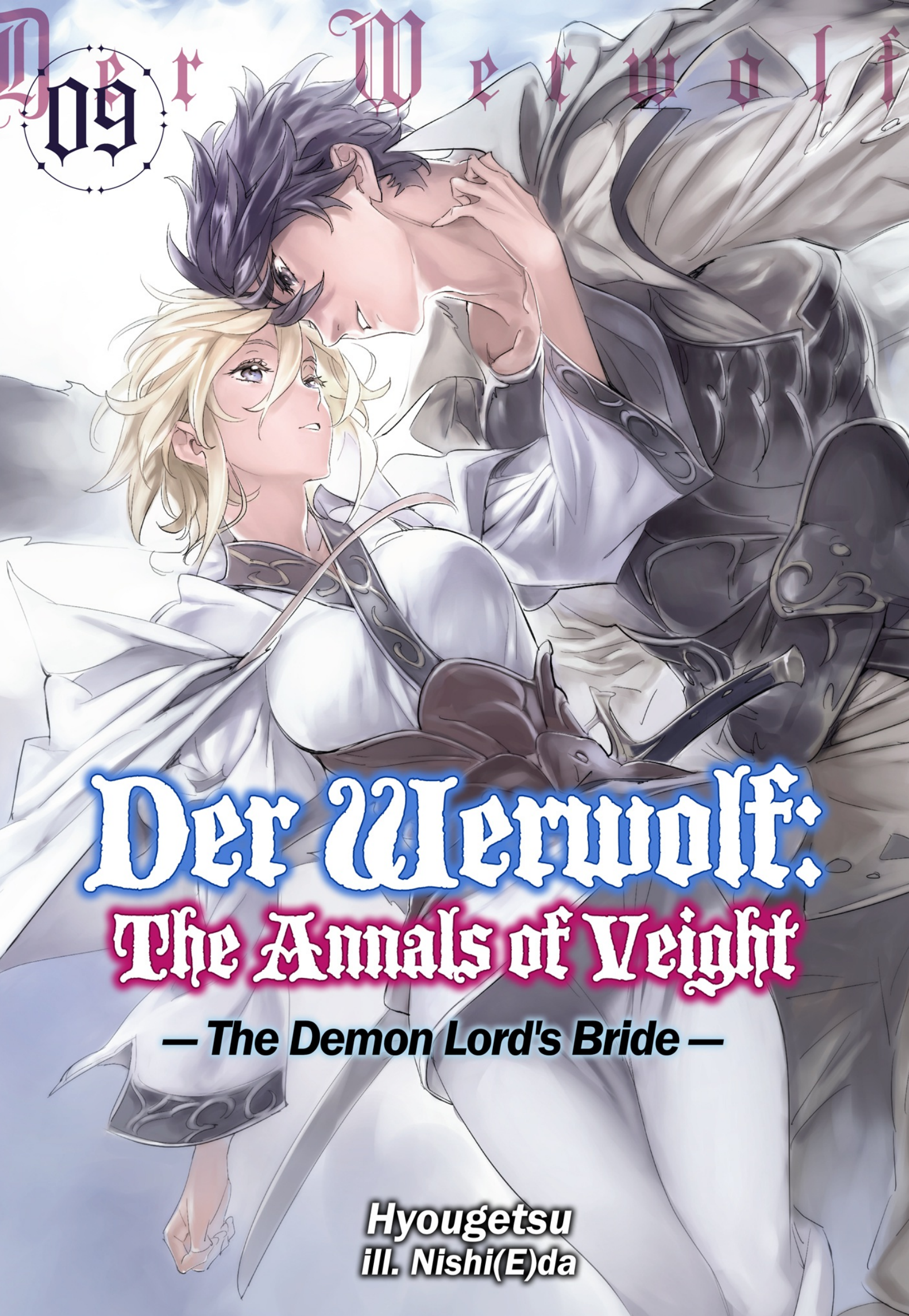
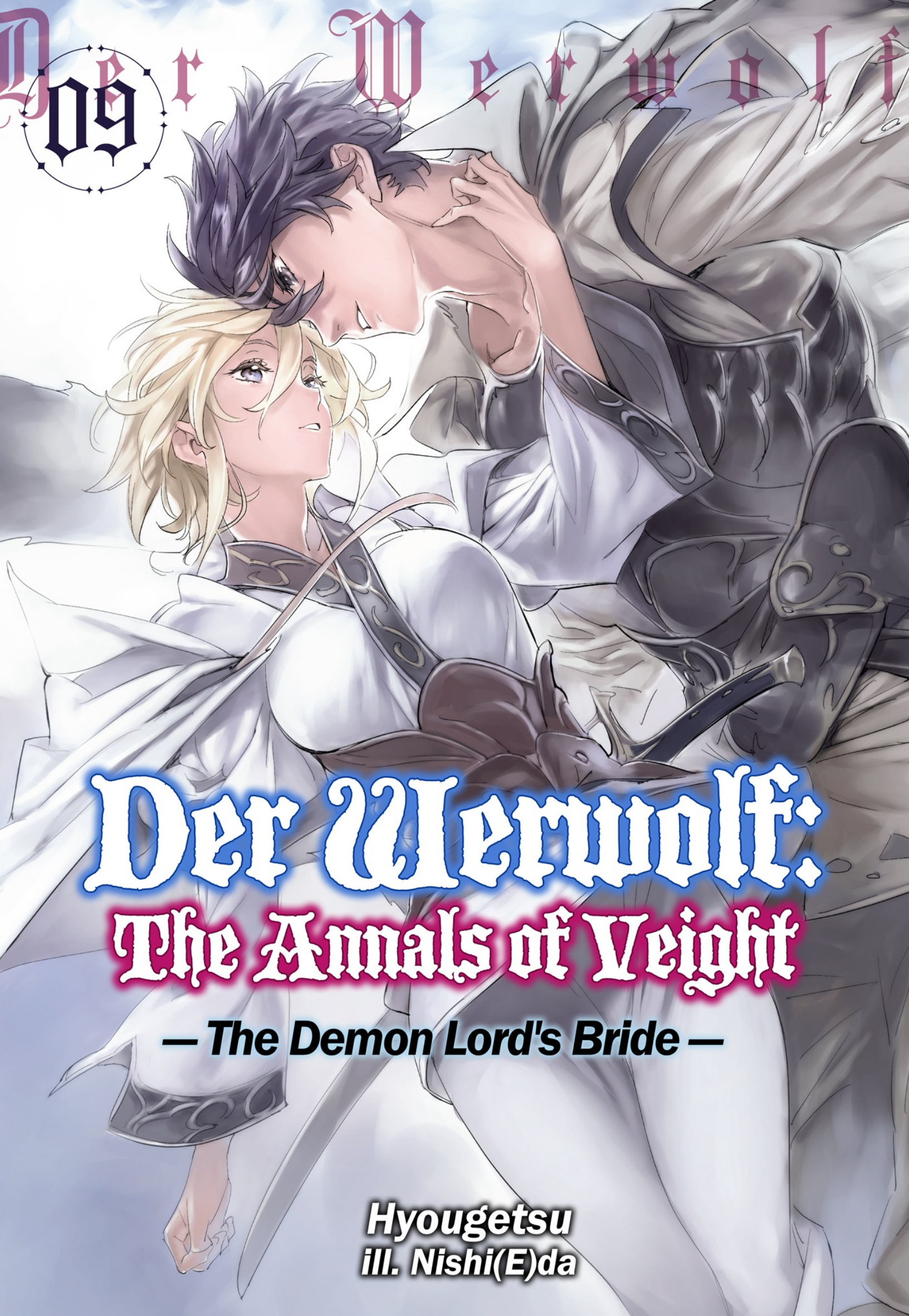
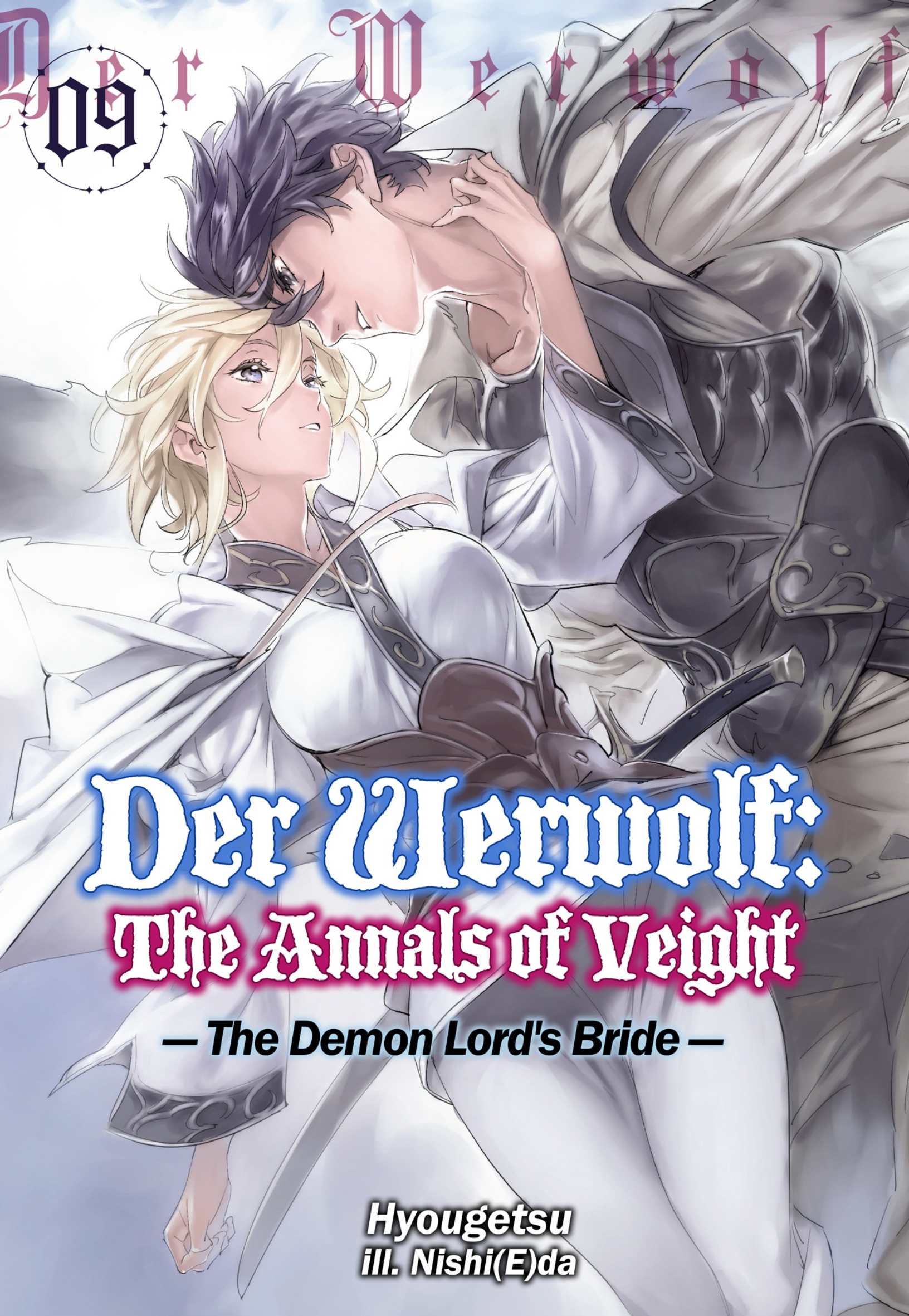
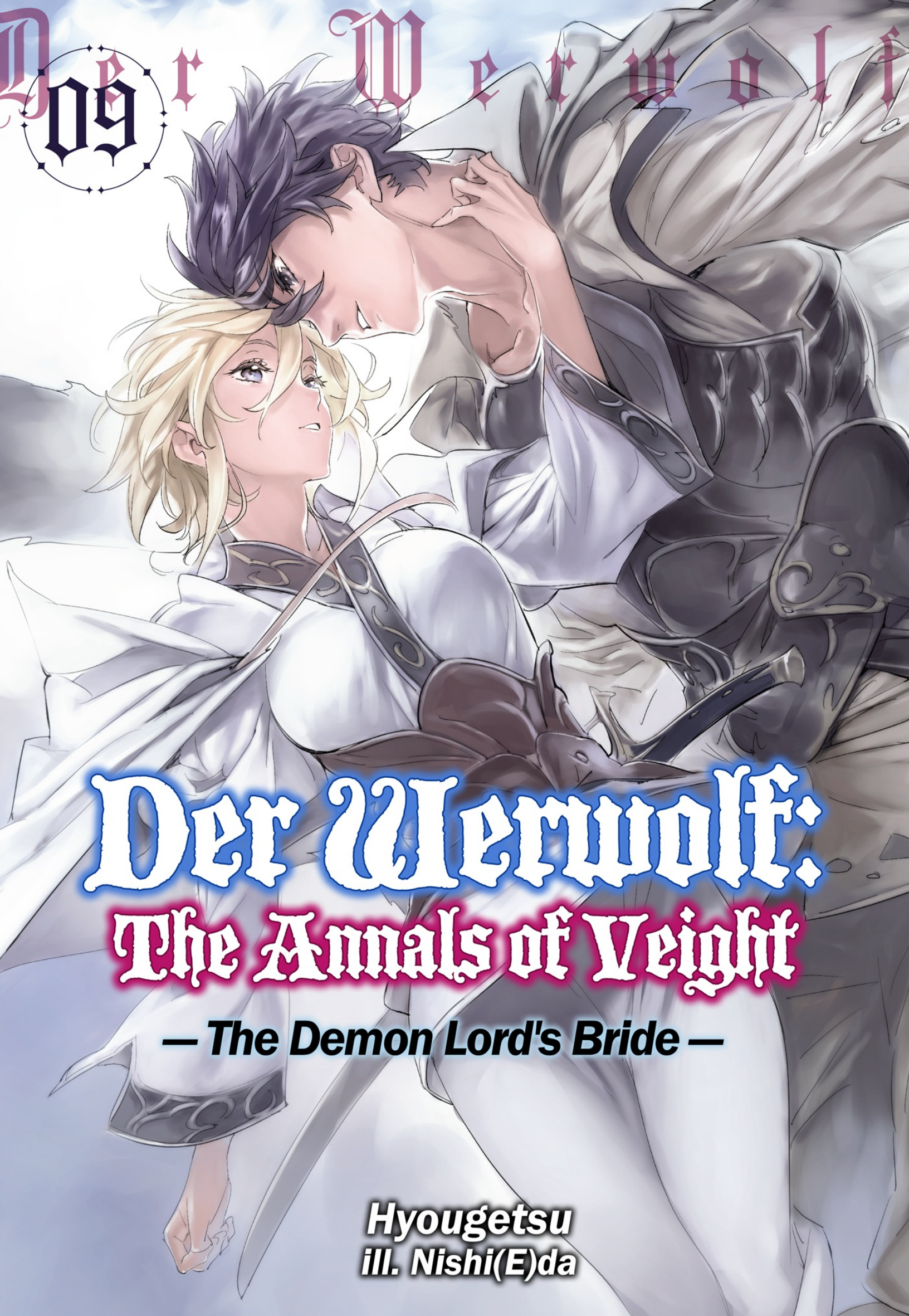
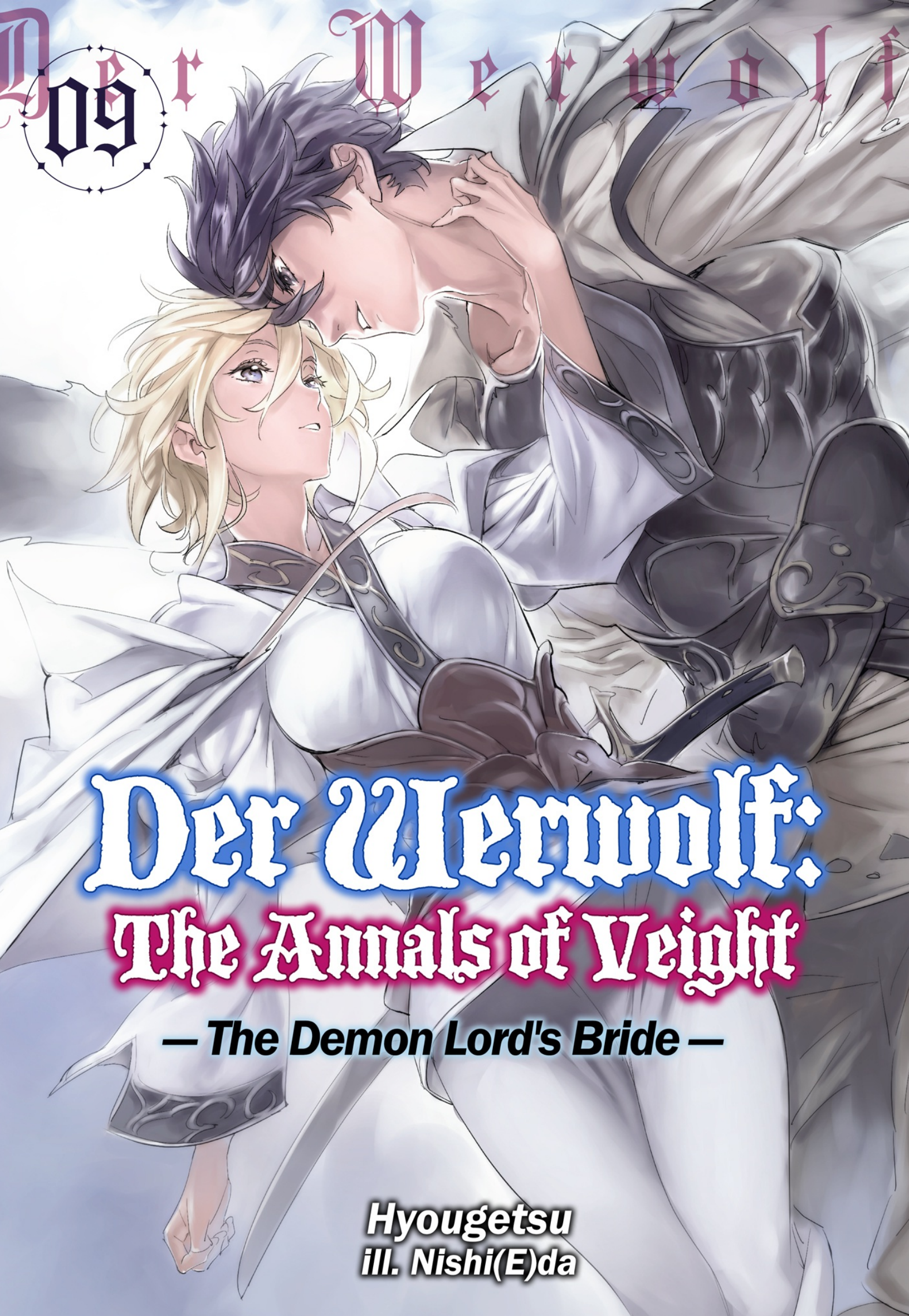
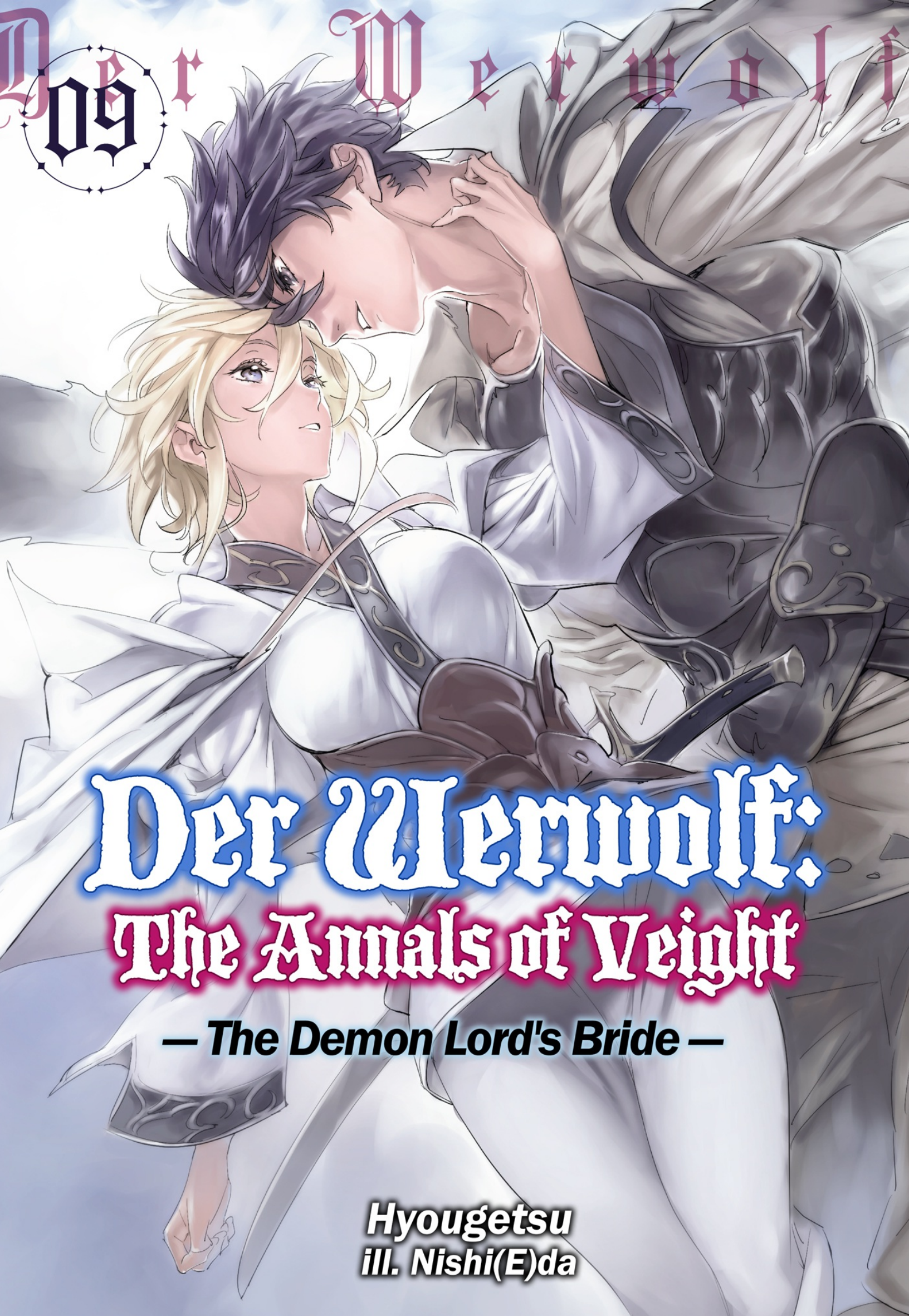
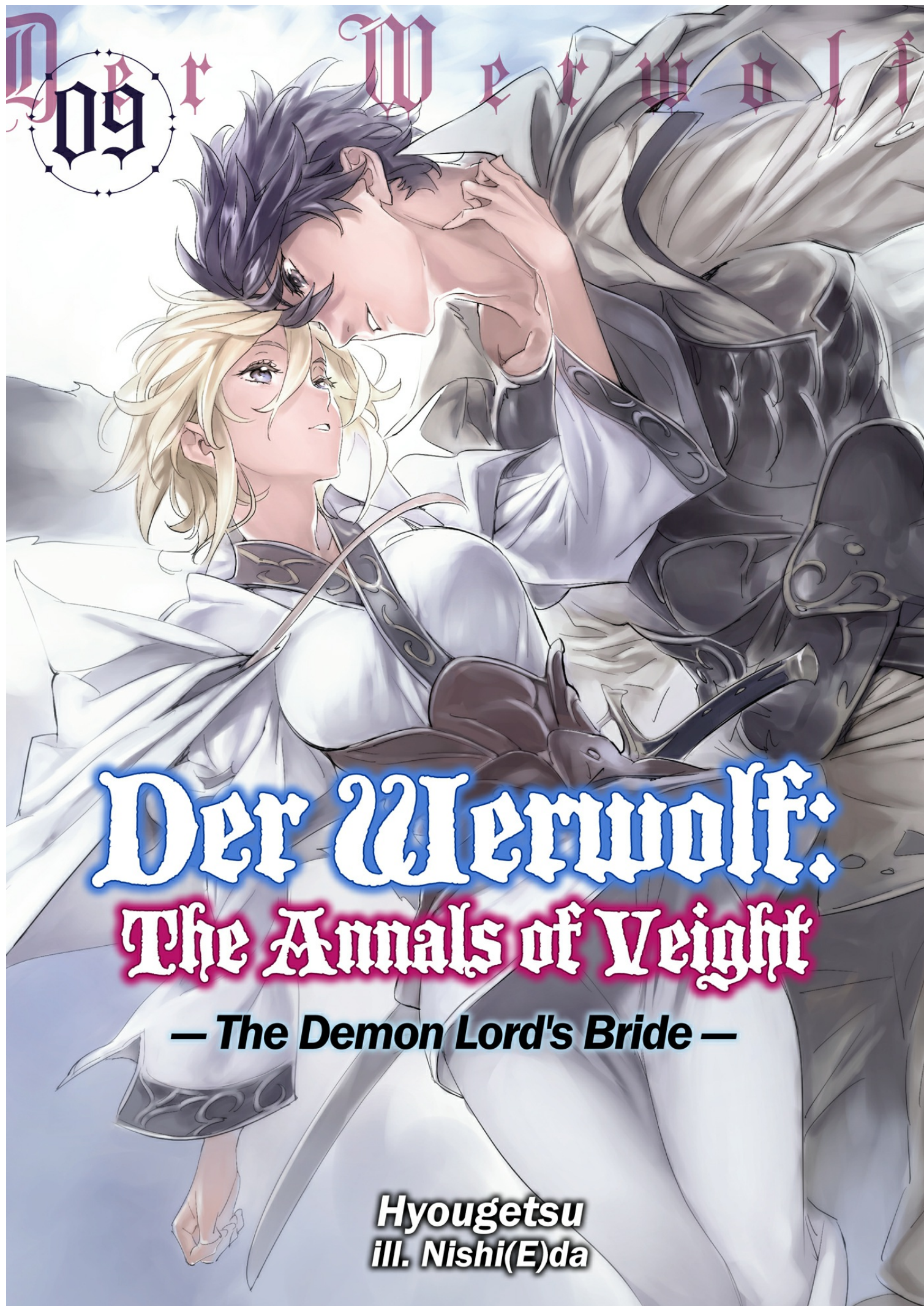




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Der Werwolf:

The Annals of Veight

— The Demon Lord's Bride —

Hyougetsu
ill. Nishi(E)da







Character

Veight

A former human who's been reborn as a werewolf. Now serves as the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander, and is also a member of the Southern Commonwealth.

Airia Lutte Aindorf

Viceroy of the trading city of Rynheit, and a Meraldian Commonwealth Councilor. Despite her stunning looks, she prefers to dress in men's clothing.



Kite

Originally worked for the Senate, but after meeting with Veight became his Vice-Commander. A master of epoch magic.



Gomoviroa

A powerful sorceress who became the Demon Lord after Friedensrichter's death. She is also Veight's magic teacher.



Fumino

An envoy from Wa's Chrysanthemum Court. She's stationed in Ryunheit to keep an eye on Ason's Legendary Treasure.

Tokitaka

The leader of the Chrysanthemum Court's spy organization, the Heavenwatchers. He is Fumino's boss.



Ryunnie

Woroy's nephew. He is currently touring the various cities in Meraldia and learning from their best tutors.



Woroy

The second son of the Doneiks Family. Though he can be overbearing at times, he's a good person at heart. After the Doneiks Rebellion was put down, he fled to Meraldia.



The story so far

After successfully completing his mission in Rolmund, Veight returned home to find a messenger from the far eastern nation of Wa waiting for him. Introducing herself as Fumino, he was surprised by how Japanese her outfit appeared to be. Veight probed her for information and discovered that while Fumino had come on a diplomatic mission, her true goal was to search for Divines—people who had reincarnated from other worlds.

Having realized that Fumino suspected him of being a reincarnator, Veight did his best to keep his true identity hidden as they traveled eastward. Upon reaching Wa, he encountered Fumino's boss, Tokitaka. In an attempt to win Veight over, Tokitaka showed him the Great Torii of the Divine, an ancient magical artifact responsible for transporting people to this world.

Upon close examination of the artifact, Veight realized it was no longer functioning, and that he would be the last Japanese person to ever be brought over by it. He felt lost for a moment after discovering his reincarnation held no deeper meaning, but soon came to terms with the reality of things, and vowed to enjoy his second life to the fullest. Because he had no grand destiny to fulfill, Veight was free to live how he wished.

Bolstered by this knowledge, he finished forging an alliance with Wa and helped bring Meraldia to even greater prosperity.

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Chapter 9

—The Black Werewolf King’s Absence and the Demon Ambassador’s Melancholy—

“Lady Airia. Lady Airia?”

“Oh, yes. I’m listening.” I hurriedly looked back up at Sir Kite and gave him my full attention. “You said that most of the miners working in the Boltz mines died during the war in north Meraldia, and now no one knows what’s become of the mine shafts, correct? Please continue your report.”

It seemed I’d been distracted again. While Kite went on to explain what his investigation team had found, I lapsed back into thought. Our conflict with Rolmund to the north was over, and we had an alliance with Wa to the east. Meraldia was at peace. The man responsible for that peace had left Ryunheit at the height of summer to explore the forest to the west. Months had passed since then, and autumn was beginning to rear its head.

The demon capital was as lively and peaceful as usual today. All of Meraldia’s domestic and international issues had been resolved, so there was nothing for the citizens to fear. The demons that used to disrupt Ryunheit’s trade were now patrolling the highways to keep our caravans safe. Neither beasts nor monsters threatened our merchants. Of course, there were still minor squabbles between races, but the leaders of the demon army did a good job in mediating all disputes, and we’d had no major incidents. Demons, by and large, had shown they were willing to respect human laws. This, too, was all thanks to the efforts of one man.

I cut my thoughts short and looked up at Kite once more. He’d halted his report and was giving me a troubled look.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“Umm, don’t take this the wrong way, Lady Airia. But ever since Veight left,

you've been spacing out a lot."

I gulped in surprise. Trying to hide how flustered I was, I hurriedly penned a missive and signed it.

"During your preliminary investigation, you found a number of strange tools that had no discernible mining purpose, correct? I'm authorizing a second, more thorough search. Here's the official order; please get your team ready."

"O-Okay. So you were listening to me... I'm terribly sorry for implying you were absent-minded! Please accept my humble apology!"

"You have nothing to apologize for. It's exactly as you say. I've been letting my mind wander too often. I'll be more careful in the future."

I have a lot of responsibilities. I can't let myself get distracted. That being said, it wasn't as though my job was very difficult at the moment. I mostly took care of whatever documents came my way. There were no pressing crises that required my input, nor were there any hard decisions I faced to make sure Ryunheit's government was running smoothly. Things were progressing at an ideal pace.

After my meeting with Kite, I took care of the remaining documents to clear my head. Once my work was finished, I glanced out the window. Judging by the position of the sun, it wasn't even noon yet. *Since I'm free now, I suppose I could take a walk around the new district in the afternoon and see how construction is progressing.*

"But he isn't around to accompany me..." I whispered.

The days since Veight's departure had been filled with tedium and loneliness. If I'd known I would be pining for him this badly, I would have begged him to stay in Ryunheit. Some time ago, he had promised to fulfill any one wish of mine. Considering how upright he was, had I wished for him to stay here, he would have done so—but I was afraid of tying him down. Knowing how kind he is, I knew he would fulfill any request of mine no matter how selfish. Doing that would mean making life difficult for him, however. I wanted to let him live his life as freely as possible.

Still, I was regretting my choice to let him go. If I was being honest with

myself, I *did* want to tie him down. I wanted to keep him all to myself. The reason I fancied him was because he was kind to everyone, but that was also what I couldn't stand about him. *I really am a shallow, foolish woman.*

It was solely thanks to him that our relationships with Wa and Rolmund were so amicable. Recently, I had even received a letter from Eleora, the new empress. Now that the political situation in Rolmund had stabilized, she was planning on sending Ashley to Meraldia as an envoy. It appeared Ashley wanted to help Woroy with his new city, as he was planning on becoming Woroy's agricultural advisor. He would also be bringing along members of his old faction, as well as members of the Doneiks faction who wanted to immigrate to Meraldia. We had already given our permission to let them live here.

As always, the Nation of Wa was strangely deferential to Veight. Their respect wasn't for the Commonwealth Council itself, but rather Veight as a person. Though I didn't know everything that happened in Wa, it seemed Veight did a great service to the Chrysanthemum Court. Regardless, thanks to his services, trade talks were proceeding smoothly. From what I could tell, Wa appeared to be led by wise and reasonable people.

Lastly, the domestic situation was stable. In fact, things were so stable in Meraldia that I had no doubt Veight would be bored staying here. He loved peace, but he was the kind of person who was never satisfied with a peaceful life. It was his nature to constantly be looking for something to do. Honestly, I was the same way, so I could empathize. But it would be nice if we could work side by side for the rest of our lives.

"He's probably gotten himself into another big fight around now..."

I've been talking to myself an awful lot recently. Though I knew it would be bad if anyone overheard, I couldn't help but make comments like these from time to time. Sighing, I got to my feet. *I need to do my job properly so that Veight praises me when he gets back.*

The first thing I saw after leaving the manor was the remodeled theater and its new signboard. The new sign read *The Black Werewolf King's Eastern Expedition* and underneath it was a picture of the Black Werewolf King's face in

profile as he stared at the rising sun. His face in his werewolf form was drawn behind him, in the predawn darkness. A group of young women were stopped in front of the sign and looking up at it.

“Lord Veight is so handsome, isn’t he!?”

“This is what Lord Veight really looks like, right? He seems nice...but stern.”

“I’ve heard he’s terrifying when he gets angry. I kinda wanna see him get mad now.”

“I bet he’d look cool when he’s angry too.”

I wasn’t very different from those fawning girls a few years ago. Before my father died, I was infatuated with plays of heroism and romance too. I knew exactly how those girls were feeling right now. Though, if I could make one correction, neither I nor anyone around me had ever seen Veight get angry. It seemed the rumors going around about him had some misinformation mixed in. The girls were unaware that I was observing them, and they excitedly continued their conversation.

“Girls, let’s go see the play on payday!”

“Sounds like a great idea. I don’t know why, but all the *Black Werewolf King* plays have cheap tickets... Well, the good seats are still expensive.”

The reason the plays were so cheap was because Forne had invested a lot of Veira’s funds into them. According to him, it was better to make people want to give you their money than to ask for it upfront.

“I think I’ll buy the Black Werewolf King’s cup! They sell a replica of the one they use for the plays!”

“Really!? You mean the one he used when he was exchanging oaths with the White Tiger!?”

“Yeah! It’s not that expensive either. I can pretend I’m the one exchanging oaths with Lord Veight instead...”

“I-I see, so they sell copies of that cup... I think I’ll buy it too.”

The girls all looked like they were enjoying themselves. *I see what Forne meant about making people want to give him their money.* As the girls’

conversation progressed, it became more about spending money for spending's sake than actually wanting any of the things they were planning on buying. Forne was pretty insightful when it came to things like this. Everything was so peaceful that I was beginning to worry something bad might happen soon. Fahn, who served as my bodyguard whenever I went out, turned to me with a bemused smile.

"All the humans love Veight. What magic did he use on them?"

I smiled back at her and replied, "It's not magic he used, Fahn. He just treated everyone with sincerity and respect. His popularity is a result of that."

"I don't really get it. The way humans think is way too complicated for me. Like, in my head it makes sense, but I still can't keep up with you guys sometimes."

Fahn smiled awkwardly, but then her expression cleared up and she leaned closer to me.

"Speaking of love, what about Veight?"

"Huh!?" I gasped. *Did she see through me?* "Veight's...a trustworthy ally and a good friend. I respect him from the bottom of my heart."

I was blindsided by the question, but I was used to giving rehearsed responses like that. After inheriting the position of viceroy, I had been forced to parrot phrases like that endlessly. Until the demon army conquered Ryunheit, that is. However, Fahn waved her hand dismissively and replied, "Sorry, I should have been more clear. What I meant to ask is, he's in love with you, right?"

That came as such a surprise that my heart skipped a beat. *He's in love with me!?*

"Impossible..." I muttered hoarsely.

Fahn grinned and replied, "I mean, he's scared to death of getting on your bad side, you know? The whole time we were up in Rolmund he was saying things like 'I need to end this quickly, or I'll make Airia mad,' and 'I can't cause Airia any more trouble than this.'"

"Really?"

“Yeah, really. I’m a little jealous, actually.”

Fahn pouted, and the expression made her look like a little kid. We strolled around the city streets, discussing Veight. After a few minutes, we both came to a halt and exchanged glances.

“I wonder what he’s up to now...” Fahn mused.

“Who knows...” I replied.

In stark contrast to the city’s festive mood, the two of us sighed languidly.

“Fahn, what do you say to getting something sweet to eat?”

“Huh, you sure? I thought you wanted to inspect the new district?”

“I don’t want to talk to the citizens while I’m this depressed. Let’s do something to lift our spirits first.”

“In that case, I know of a café that’s really popular with the other girls in the werewolf squad! It’s a pretty small place so I wanted to keep it a secret, but I’ll show you. Come on, follow me!”

“You don’t have to run, Fahn!”

As Fahn took my hand and led me down the street, I felt my spirits raise a little. *Please come back before I get depressed again, Veight.*

—Kite’s Investigation—

“Alright, break time’s over,” one of the knights assigned to guard our investigation squad said. He signaled to his comrades, and they got to their feet. The miner I’d been conversing with got up from the boulder we’d been sitting on and helped me to my feet.

“We’re leaving already?”

Another one of the knights gave me a wry smile as he lit his lantern. “If we go at your pace we’ll never make the deadline.”

It was a bit embarrassing to be told that by someone my father’s age. All of the knights assigned to this mission were pretty old, but they were able to wear their heavy armor with ease. Apparently they were more lightly equipped than

they would be for a battle, but I wouldn't be able to walk in what they were wearing now, much less full plate mail.

I was currently in the middle of investigating the Boltz mines. I had three knights for protection, and two miners to guide me. The knights all had the title of "First Class," which was a recently established position. The members of the Commonwealth Council—Veight especially—had felt bad for the displaced knights, so they'd created the title of First Class to let them retain some measure of status. One of Veight's favorite sayings was "Respect other people's pride, or they'll resent you." Werewolves didn't care about worthless things like pride or honor, but Veight was oddly understanding of humans' weird hangups. *Seriously, where did he learn all of this?*

Meanwhile, the two miners who were serving as my guides were new to the job. The demon army's Second Division Ogre Regiment had done some serious damage to the Boltz mines during their invasion of the north. All of the old mine workers had been slaughtered, and the current crop of miners were all new recruits. They didn't know anything about the older shafts that weren't in use anymore, but they were still experienced miners in their own right. Though they weren't the perfect guides, they were better than nothing.

Honestly, I would have preferred a mage assistant as well, but mages were in short supply, which was why I was stuck investigating this massive mine all by myself. *Sheesh, why do you guys always saddle me with so much work? Well, I guess this is still way better than when I was stuck working for the damned Senate.* Besides, it was the Senate's fault I had to investigate this accursed rock hole in the first place.

When Princess Eleora had seized control of North Meraldia, the Senators surrendered to her, but she still sentenced them all to exile. A Rolmund-style exile was basically an execution. With soaked clothes, you'd freeze before you could go anywhere. However, all reports said that the Senators had tried to make it to the Boltz mines.

Man, why'd they pick this place? That question hung in everyone's minds, but the people who might have known the answer had all been killed. *Jeez, even after you're dead you're still making my life difficult. I wish you'd just die already. Oh wait, you're already dead. Whoops, I can't think like that. Veight*

won't like it. For some reason, he really hated it when people disparaged the dead. *Maybe studying necromancy teaches you to respect the dead?*

I cast epoch magic on the tunnel floor, trying to pick up traces of activity.

"It looks like this shaft hasn't been used in over a hundred years... I don't sense any ore nearby. I'm guessing this is an abandoned area."

"This isn't it either then, huh?" one of the knights said with a sigh.

Just be grateful you didn't have to walk all the way down it to confirm that. If only Veight had been the one to conquer this area, then we wouldn't be in this mess. I'd investigated this mine once before, back when I'd been working for the Senate. They'd wanted me to see what I could glean after the ogres had ravaged the mines. When I'd used epoch magic on the rubble to view the past, I'd seen just how devastating ogres could be. Back then I'd been terrified of the ogres' physical strength, but now I knew Veight was even stronger than that. Honestly, it was kind of crazy to think about. There was no way a human could stand against someone stronger than a freaking ogre. *Thank god he's a good demon.*

The really crazy thing, though, was that I was that monstrous guy's vice-commander. *You can never tell where life will take you.* As I was thinking that, I walked into a tunnel of unknown purpose. Most of the mine shafts I'd investigated had been abandoned, either because they'd been flooded or collapsed, or because all the ore in the shaft had been mined, but this one was different.

"The slant of this tunnel is strange... It seems to be heading...upwards?"

The slope was gradual enough that most people wouldn't notice it, but I was constantly using epoch magic to accurately gauge my location, so I could tell that our elevation was rising slightly as we walked.

"Hey, do mine shafts normally slope upward?" I asked.

"I'm sure there's a few like that out there, but all the shafts in this mine slope downward. It makes carting ore up a pain in the ass," one of the miners replied.

This calls for further investigation. Don't think you can trick me, you codgy old Senators. This shaft appeared to be quite old, but well-maintained. Moreover,

my magic confirmed that people had gone in and out of it regularly.

“It’s hard to get a precise reading in tunnels like these, but someone came here alone a year or two ago,” I said.

“Who?”

“Whoever it was, they came without any lights, so I can’t use past sight to figure that out.”

Going by the timing, it was possible one of the Senators had survived the exile and made it here. The knights exchanged glances.

“Hauman and I will take point. Gruad, you secure our rear.”

“Gotcha.”

Two of the three knights strode forward. The remaining one fell back behind the miners. Their movements were perfectly coordinated. Eleora had claimed they didn’t deserve to be knights and stripped them of their positions, but from what I could tell, they were pretty good at their jobs. It was reassuring to have them as bodyguards. Protected by the two old knights in front, I carefully made my way deeper into the mine shaft.

Waiting at the end of the shaft was an open door. There was a room beyond it, with a single corpse lying in the middle. This appeared to be the end of this shaft. Though the room was cold and damp, the corpse was dry.

“Whoever this is, they’ve been dead for a while now. And it looks like all they were wearing was underwear.”

“It’s probably one of the exiled Senators. I’m amazed he made it this far.”

The knights crowded around the corpse. If I investigated it, I’d be able to find out its identity easily enough, but I kept my distance. There was something strange about this body. *How’s it so dry when the room’s this dank?*

“Guys. Something’s not right about that corpse. Be careful.”

“Don’t tell me it’s...”

The knights looked incredulous, but they nevertheless drew their swords. Just then, I noticed the corpse was holding onto something. The object was half-

buried in mud, but I recognized that shape. It was a goblet, identical to the artifact I'd seen in Wa. My attention had been so focused on the corpse that I hadn't noticed until now.



Oh man, this isn't good.

"Everyone, watch out! Get away from that thing!"

At my warning, the knights all raised their shields and backed up protectively around me. Trembling, the two miners hid behind me.

"What is it? What's going on?"

"The goblet in that corpse's hands is a magic artifact!"

I hurriedly tried to cast epoch magic on the goblet the corpse was gripping, but before I could, a whirlpool of mana erupted from it. I hadn't sensed anything from it a moment ago, but now the goblet was brimming with mana. At the same time, the corpse began to spasm.

[C-C-C-C-C-C-Curse you... y-y-y-you t-t-traitorous i-i-i-investigator...]

The corpse's strained voice echoed throughout the room. The echo carried with it an odd quality that had nothing to do with the shape of the cavern. *What the hell's with this guy?*

One of the knights turned to me. "What do we do?"

"F-For now, run! I don't think we can take that thing head-on!"

It was an embarrassment for Meraldia's preeminent epoch mage to jump to conclusions without first gathering intel. Unfortunately, I wasn't in any position to do a proper investigation right now. I wasn't capable of fighting, and the knights couldn't see the flow of mana like I could. Our only option was to retreat. The corpse writhed on the ground, its bones creaking and cracking.

[I-I-I-I-I-I must... g-g-g-g-g-g-g-get my revenge... o-o-o-o-on Rolmund's...]

"I don't care about your backstory! Just stay dead!"

I whirled around and dashed toward the door. Before I could even reach it, the walls of the room crumbled away and hordes of skeletons began flooding in. They were all armed, and each of them possessed a large amount of mana, which meant a necromancer must have raised these skeleton warriors. While I was trying to plot a course of action, the knights took charge.

"Secure a path of retreat! Defend that doorway with your lives!"

“Sir Kite, you have to escape! We’ll hold them off!”

The three knights clumped up in front of us. Nodding, I pushed the two miners in front of me and ran out of the room.

“Move! Those old geezers won’t be able to escape until we’re safe!” I shouted.

“O-Okay!”

The skeletons brandished their weapons and charged at the three knights. *Goddammit, they’re insanely outnumbered.*

“You guys run too!” I shouted to them.

But the knights made no move to run. They rebuffed the first wave of skeletons with their shields and readied their weapons.

“Don’t be stupid! Our job is to protect you!”

“Get outta here, kid!”

The knights counterattacked with their swords, using their shields to cover for each other. As far as I could tell, they were about as skilled at swordplay as the skeletons they were fighting. But since they were outnumbered 20-to-1, there was no way they’d be able to win. However, if I stayed here to argue with them, it would just put them in a worse position.

“D-Don’t blame me if you get killed!” I shouted.

“We won’t! Like I said, our job’s to protect you so we ain’t running until you’re safe!”

The knights all flashed me a smile.

“Exactly. When you get out, you better tell everyone how gallant and heroic we were, you hear!?”

“Is that really what’s important right now!?” I screamed back while running as fast as I could. I was far enough away now that I couldn’t see the knights anymore, but I still heard one of them say, “What are you talking about? That’s the most important thing! If people know we fought with honor, our kids will get a bigger pension to live off of!”

“You blasted idiots!”

One of the knights shouted something back, but I was too far to make his words out. The two miners led the way, plotting the shortest route out of the mine shafts. By the time we got outside, it was late evening. The three of us ran down the mountain and ordered the mine operators to evacuate everyone from the area. All the workers, all the guards, and all the engineers.

“Run! There’s a horde of skeletons coming! Go to the nearby cities and let the Viceroys know! Send someone to Vongang to ask for reinforcements as well! I need to go back to the demon capital and report this to the Demon Lord!”

I jumped onto my horse and glanced back at the mine. Casting a quick farsight spell, I saw the horde of skeletons pouring out of the mine entrance. Standing at the head of the swarm were the three knights. They’d been pierced through by spears, and judging by the battered state of their armor, they’d fought until the bitter end. Sadly, they’d now been turned into zombies. As much as I wanted to let them rest as soon as possible, all I could do for the moment was run. If I didn’t escape safely and get the word out, thousands more would die.

“Shit...”

As I galloped toward Ryunheit, I glanced westward. Watching the setting sun dip behind the horizon, I muttered, “Why aren’t you here right now? We need you, Veight...”

—The Chain of Hatred—

Unforgivable. Unacceptable. I come from a long family of esteemed Senators. It is my job to protect the Meraldian Federation, and yet that foreign vixen banished me, sentencing me to death! Unforgivable. You will pay for this. I’ll destroy you. I’ll destroy all traitors! All the citizens and soldiers who betrayed me shall perish. Their cities, too. I will reform this nation. I will turn it into a truly just country, where all are loyal to me. No one will betray me, no one will think for themselves, and no one will rest.

As soon as Kite arrived in Ryunheit he delivered his report to Airia.

“Thank goodness you returned safely, Sir Kite. We were able to avoid being

taken by surprise thanks to your report.”

Airia sent a messenger to gather the city’s garrison, as well as the demon army soldiers and Beluzan shock troops stationed in the city. When she turned back to Kite, he was hiding his face, but he couldn’t completely hide the tears spilling from his eyes.

“Dammit... Those old geezers...got turned into zombies... All because they protected me...”

Airia sympathized with Kite’s grief, but right now she had a job to do. If the enemy possessed the ability to bring defeated soldiers back on their side as zombies, then she couldn’t allow an open battle on the plains. The only way to reduce casualties would be to have everyone fight defensive sieges. Airia quickly ordered her troops to set up fortifications and sent messengers out to tell all travelers and soldiers on patrol to evacuate immediately. It was only after she was done that she could give Kite her attention.

“The knights fulfilled their duty splendidly,” she said. “They are the pride of Meraldia, paragons of what all knights should aspire to.”

While they hadn’t been particularly good fighters or commanders, they had embodied the spirit of knighthood. Choosing her words carefully, Airia did her best to console Kite.

“They sacrificed their lives to save all of ours. We have to ensure their sacrifice wasn’t in vain.”

Kite rubbed the tears from his face and nodded resolutely. “It’s as you say, Lady Airia. What... What should I do next?”

Just then, Airia remembered that Woroy was still stuck in the Fetid Wastes, his city only half-built.

“Go to Sir Woroy. He hasn’t had time to finish his city yet, so there’s no fortifications. He has no way to scout out incoming raids, either. He’ll need your epoch magic.”

“Understood. You can count on me.” Kite got to his feet and bowed to Airia.

Worried, she gave him one final warning, “Don’t do anything reckless, Sir Kite.

If things look desperate, run. Fleeing from the skeletons shouldn't be too hard, considering their speed."

"Of course, I won't risk my life needlessly." Nodding, Kite added, "If I died, Veight wouldn't have a vice-commander to rely on."

"Yes, that's absolutely right."

Is it just me, or is Sir Kite a little too devoted to Veight? Airia thought to herself.

By the time the skeleton army reached their first target, all of Meraldia's 17 cities had been alerted. Every city had barred their gates and brought their people inside; the cities' garrisons and militia were on patrol at all times. The first city to be attacked by the skeleton army was the fortress city of Vongang—the same city where Eleora had judged and exiled the Senate.

"So they really did come here first," Dunieva, Vongang's viceroy, muttered as he surveyed the advancing army. "This city may have been built for war, but I'm getting tired of being invaded every other month..."

The knights standing with him smiled ruefully at that.

"Cheer up, Lord Dunieva. We're on your side this time. There's nothing to fear," one of them reassured.

"Besides, we've rebuilt the walls to be even sturdier than before," another added.

Their confident smiles helped assuage Dunieva's worries.

"I suppose so. Most importantly, the longer we hold out here, the safer the other cities will be. If we can show everyone the might of Vongang, maybe..."

"Maybe what?" one of Dunieva's aides asked, cocking their head.

The viceroy grinned. "Maybe the next *Black Werewolf King* play will be about our city!"

"That'd be great!"

The knights smirked and cast their gaze downwards. The skeleton army had

reached the gates. They slammed their swords and spears against the iron doors, but the gates didn't budge.

"I don't know who summoned this unholy army, but don't think you'll be getting into our city that easily, you bastard. Rolmund's princess was a way tougher foe than you boneheads," The knight commander muttered. He then turned to his men and shouted, "Bring all the boiling oil and fire arrows we have here. It's time we got revenge for Hauman's squad!"

"Yes, sir!"

Vongang survived the first night of the siege without taking a single casualty.

Vongang wasn't the only city the skeletons attacked. Shortly after the siege on Vongang began, Vest's scouts spotted another army heading towards the old capital.

"Shit..." Vest's garrison commander muttered when he heard the report.

His young vice-commander quizzically cocked his head. "What's the problem, sir? The enemy consists solely of infantry, and they don't have any siege weapons. I know Vest's walls are old, but they should hold against foot soldiers at least."

"We can defend indefinitely, but we're up against undead who have no need for rest or food," the commander replied, shaking his head. "What do you think will happen to us once we're completely surrounded?"

"Well...we'll run out of food in ten days..."

Unlike Vongang, Vest was unprepared for a siege. The city's emergency stockpile of rations was quite small, and there was little arable land around it. If Vest became completely isolated from its neighboring cities, it would starve in a few weeks.

Just then, the soldier on lookout duty came running over. "Bad news, sir! There's a new force coming from the south! The battalion appears to be all cavalry—five hundred men strong!"

"Cavalry from the south!?"

The Boltz Mines were situated east of Vest, and all the reports thus far claimed the skeleton army was all infantry. Chances were, this new force wasn't made of undead. Everyone ran to the south wall and strained their eyes to make out the oncoming army's banners.

"It's the demon army!"

"Are they here...as reinforcements?"

Vest's garrison commander had crossed swords with the demon army's Second Division in the past, so he had a hard time seeing demons as allies. The demons that were headed this way now were all kentauros, which explained why the lookout had mistaken them for cavalry. One of the kentauros broke away from the group and galloped over to the gates.

"Open up, guys! We've brought supplies from Thuvan to help Vest with the siege! If you don't hurry, the skeletons'll get here first!"

To the commander's surprise, the kentauros was a young woman.

"I can't believe kentauros even make little girls like her fight."

"Demons really are barbaric..." his vice-commander muttered.

However, the kentauros' next words left the garrison commander and his troops flabbergasted. "Oh, I almost forgot to introduce myself! I'm Firnir the Swift Gale, Thuvan's viceroy, and a demon army general! Now hurry up and open these gates!"

"Wha!?"

"She's—"

"I heard Thuvan's viceroy was the kentauros' strongest warrior, but..."

"She came here personally to reinforce us!?"

Demon or not, a viceroy was a viceroy. Protocol dictated that city soldiers followed their orders.

"Hey, get those gates open ASAP! We can't leave a viceroy waiting!" the garrison commander shouted.

"It doesn't matter if she's a kentauros, you lot better treat her with respect!"

We don't want the other cities thinking the people of Vest have no manners!" his vice-commander added.

Unable to hide their surprise, the soldiers muttered quietly to each other as they started cranking open the gate.

"Thuvan's gotta be busy shoring up its own defenses, but they sent their viceroy all the way here to help us..."

"Those guys are all demons, too. I never imagined they'd come to our aid..."

"Yeah, but they did. I guess the demon army isn't anything like we were led to believe."

As soon as the gates were open, Firnir helped her kentauros move the supplies they'd brought into the city. Most of the wagons were safely within Vest's walls by the time the skeletons crested the horizon. When she heard the skeletons were approaching, Firnir turned to her men and raised her spear high.

"It's time to head back to our city, guys! Whatever you do, don't engage the skeletons! There's no honor in fighting undead, and if they kill you, they'll turn you into a zombie!"

"Roger!"

The burly kentauros soldiers loosed battle cries as they wheeled around and galloped out of the city. Vest's troops watched them go with a look of awe.

"They left..."

"Yeah. They didn't even ask for anything in return. They just dropped off supplies...and left."

The soldiers of the north were having a hard time understanding Firnir's free-spirited personality. However, thanks to her assistance, they no longer had to worry about fighting a protracted siege.

"I guess we owe those demons one."

"Yeah."

The commander started barking orders, bringing the soldiers' attention back to the matter at hand, "They're here, men! Everyone, to your posts! Don't let a

single skeleton into the city! If we let Vest fall, we'll be the laughingstock of Meraldia!"

"Y-Yes, sir!"

The sight that greeted the soldiers from atop the city walls was a strange one. A sea of skeletons filled the plains east of Vest, making it seem like a writhing avalanche was advancing toward the city.

"There's gotta be tens of thousands—no, hundreds of thousands of them."

"If they had even one siege weapon, they'd level this city..."

Enough skeletons stayed behind to surround Vest, while the rest moved on to besiege other cities. As he watched them go, one of the soldiers muttered, "They're like an avalanche..."

The skeletons' numbers continued to grow as they marched, increasing the size of the avalanche.

—Woroy's Predicament—

Contrary to its name, the Fetid Wastes was a surprisingly fertile region; but right now, it was facing an unprecedented crisis.

"Those undead freaks will be here soon! Anyone fit to travel, evacuate to the south!" Woroy shouted.

He'd received a report a few days ago that an army of undead skeletons had risen from the Boltz Mines to the northwest. Since then, he'd repeatedly urged the hundreds of construction workers who'd come with him to flee south. However, none of them had heeded his warnings yet, and this time was no different.

A young man with a scarred cheek stepped forward and said, "Yer Highness, we ain't goin' nowhere. We're all a bunch o' criminals who got exiled from the other cities."

"Don't worry, both Airia and Shatina promised they'd take you in as refugees. You guys will be safe with them."

The men just shook their heads. Most of the people here were former

bandits, mercenaries, and murderers. The man speaking to Woroy now had once led a bandit group. Though they'd once been lowlifes, Woroy's charisma and strength had won them over. Now they were all fiercely loyal to the prince.

"We're in the middle of building our own city. Once it's done we can all live here, and we won't have to steal to survive. This is the first time in our lives we're doing work we can be proud of. Like hell we're gonna run from some moldy old bones!"

"Calm down, guys. It's not as if you'll be running away for good. After things calm down you can all come back and start building again." Woroy did his best to persuade them, but the workers were being uncharacteristically stubborn. Normally they followed his orders without complaint.

"I heard those Senate bastards are behind this attack. We ain't running from those bumbling twats, Yer Highness."

"Yeah! This is our one chance to live honest lives! If we run from the Senate now, we don't deserve to be called men!"

Woroy sighed in exasperation. He understood the men's feelings, but they wouldn't survive if they stayed here. Just then, Kite came running over.

"Your Highness, we're in trouble! The skeletons are advancing faster than predicted. They'll be here before dawn!"

"I see. I suppose it makes sense that they'd travel faster than human armies, since they don't need to rest."

It was currently night. Kite had discovered the skeleton army two nights ago. There wasn't time to call for help. Because there were no roads that cut through this area, communication with the surrounding cities was slow.

Barnack, the Sword Saint, tentatively offered his opinion, "I think it's too late to flee. The workers are tired after a full day of manual labor, so we'd need to make camp after just a few hours of marching."

"Good point. We might not be able to outrun the skeletons."

Woroy knew from experience that he'd lose a lot of men attempting a forced march out of here. Anyone who couldn't keep up with the grueling pace would

almost certainly be devoured by the skeletons. The two options available to him were to try and slow the skeletons down with an elite crew while everyone else escaped, or to defend this half-built city until aid could arrive.

After a few seconds, he made his decision.

“Fortunately, we’ve got a lot of raw materials here. We can use them to create a makeshift barricade. Everyone, get to work!”

“Aye aye, boss-man prince!”

The men nodded enthusiastically, but Kite looked worried.

“Your Highness, isn’t that too dangerous? There could be hundreds of thousands of them by now!”

Woroy stripped off his sweat-stained shirt and flashed Kite a reassuring smile. “If we try to run, there’ll be a lot of people who won’t be able to keep up. I’ll stay here and buy us time. You get out of here with the other civilians.”

“I’m not going anywhere! If I let you die, I’d be letting Veight down!” Kite picked up Woroy’s breastplate and handed it to him. “I’ll sound out their movements and relay that info to you. You’re one of Rolmund’s greatest generals, so that should give you the edge you need to win, right?”

“I dunno if I’m all that, but you can count on me. I’m not the man I once was. This time, I won’t let any of my men die.” Woroy donned his armor and picked up the cross-shaped spear he’d acquired in Wa. “Compared to the Astral Fencer, a bunch of skeletons is nothing. We can hold out against these boneheads for years!”

Woroy led Kite to the warehouse that stored their building materials.

“What on earth...” Kite muttered in shock as he laid eyes on the warehouse. Woroy grinned mischievously.

“Surprised? I made sure the warehouse could double as a fortress in case of an emergency.”

The stone had been piled up to form a rudimentary wall, and all of the lumber was laid out in an abatis. With this, they’d be able to weather the skeleton invasion. In Rolmund, armies often attacked their enemy while they were in the

middle of building new forts, so it was common to organize building materials in this manner.

“But you gotta remember, this is still just a bunch of piled stone and wood. It hasn’t been mortared together yet, and we don’t have any watchtowers or turrets. It’s better than fighting out in the open, but it’s no castle.”

As this was just a collection of raw building materials, there weren’t any rooms for people to stay in. Kite and the workers built makeshift living quarters for themselves, but they were far from comfortable. Still, this was the safest place for miles. Woroy honestly wasn’t sure he’d be able to hold out in such a ramshackle fort, but he didn’t let any of his unease show. It’d only make the others worry if their commander seemed unsure.

Once everyone was settled in, he said in a confident, booming voice, “Block the entrance with logs, and pile the walls high with obstacles! If we can keep the enemy from getting in, we’ll be able to repel them without a fight!”

They were up against skeletons who never got tired. If they fought head-on, the workers’ exhaustion would pile up, and they’d be overwhelmed. With moonlight and torchlight to guide them, the grizzled men got to work.

“Aye! Like hell we’ll run from dogs of the Senate.”

“Yeah, we’ll show them who’s boss!”

Though the men’s morale was high, time was not on their side. A few hours before the fort was fully barricaded, Kite shouted, “Your Highness, we’re out of time! They’re twenty-four clicks away, to the west-northwest! I don’t have an accurate count of their numbers, but it’s easily more than ten thousand!”

Woroy nodded, then ordered, “Everyone, drop off your last haul, then get inside!” He raised his spear high to gather everyone’s attention. “We’re in luck, guys! This is our chance to show off our valor! Once we make it out of this, you’ll be able to brag to all the beautiful girls in Meraldia about how you defended this half-built city from an army of a million skeletons!”

“Yeaaaaaaaaah!”

The men raised their hammers and axes with a resounding cheer.

Barnack also unsheathed his sword with a wan smile. “There’s no one better at rallying a bunch of hoodlums than you, Your Highness.”

“It’s not exactly a skill I was trying to hone, but it’s something you pick up on when you’re traveling.” Woroy smiled wryly at Barnack.

Finally, the skeletons arrived. They were completely silent, save for the rusty creaking of their armor.

“This is how the enemy’s deployed,” Kite explained, placing small stones on his rough sketch of the fortress to represent the skeletons. Woroy examined the formation for a few seconds, then smiled.

“Looks like they don’t understand tactics at all. They’re like a mob without a leader.”

“Skeletons act without much thought, unless their summoner gives specific orders.”

“I see.”

Woroy brandished his spear and shouted, “Bring out all the torches, and start patrolling the interior of the fort! The enemy’s like a flood, give them the slightest opening and they’ll start rushing in!”

Woroy’s analogy was spot-on.

“Boss, they’re trying to climb the walls!”

“We’ve put up plenty of obstacles at the top, so they won’t be able to get up that easily. Form into teams of threes, and take out any stragglers who make it past our defenses!”

The sounds of metal slamming into stone could be heard coming from all directions. Barnack pointed with his sword and said calmly, “They appear to be striking at the walls.”

“They’re probably looking for any cracks they can widen. It’s a real shame. All the high-quality stone we bought is going to be full of nicks now.”

Though Woroy attempted to sound nonchalant, the incessant clang of iron on rock was beginning to grate on him. The noise would make it hard to sleep, too. To make matters worse, the improvised fort was proving to be insufficient. Bad

news started trickling in not long after hostilities started.

“Your Highness! They’ve climbed over the logs we put to block the entrance by using the defeated skeletons as stepping stones!”

“Don’t panic! They can only squeeze through the entrance two at a time. Have the spear crews hold them at bay while the axe and hammer squads crush their skulls!”

“Lord Woroy! They’ve started tearing down the obstacles we put on the walls! They’ve brought over the ladders we left at the construction site too!”

“Surround the ones that climb up with shields and push them back down! If we let them get a foothold, they’ll tire us out even faster!”

Sweating profusely, Kite looked up at Woroy. “Your Highness, the skeletons are more resourceful than I expected.”

“I didn’t think they’d be smart enough to use ladders. I figured skeletons were too dumb to do anything but flail their weapons around.”

“I can’t be certain, but I think their summoner is somewhere nearby. They’re adapting too quickly to the situation.”

“That means the longer we hold out, the better off the other cities will be, since the enemy commander will be stuck here.”

Just then, someone ran over with another report.

“We’re in deep trouble! They’re using arrows!”

“What!?”

Skeletons usually used their spears and shields to form an unstoppable wall of bone, but it seemed now there were some that were using bows.

Kite looked at Woroy and explained, “Skeleton archers aren’t very accurate, and their range is a lot lower than human bowmen. But we can’t move from here, so...”

The warehouse-fortress had no roof—Woroy and the others were sitting ducks against high-angle fire.

Realizing the danger, Woroy immediately shouted, “Everyone, raise your

shields above your heads! Hold out until the enemy runs out of arrows!”

“Uwoooooh!”

“Gaaah!”

As Woroy started hearing screams among his men, another runner brought the most devastating report yet. “Your Highness, the people they’re killing are getting up again! They’ve been turned to zombies!”

Not only did the rain of arrows seem to be endless, but the people it killed rose again as enemies. The fresh corpses started attacking their former comrades, sowing panic and confusion in the darkness.

“Hey, wait, stop! I’m on your side! Wai—”

“Waaaaaah, stooooop! Don’t stab me, I’m on your side! I’m still alive!”

“Look out behind you! Th-They’ve—”

Sounds of battle could be heard from within the fort now. Visibility was poor under the best of circumstances, and right now the sun still hadn’t risen. There was no way to get a grasp on the overall situation.

Woroy sucked in a deep breath and shouted as loudly as he could, “All units, retreat! Move back to the fort’s center! Annihilate all the zombies inside and secure the area!”

The inner depths of the fort were a maze of twisting, narrow passageways. Arrows fired from outside would have a much harder time finding their mark. The zombies had ballooned in number by the time Woroy was able to reform his ranks and carry out an orderly retreat. Hiding in a narrow hallway, Kite said, “Your Highness, the skeletons have taken control of the outer walls. They’ll be posting their archers on them soon.”

“Guess we won’t be able to retake those walls then,” Barnack muttered as he cut down another group of zombies. Despite his age, his swordsmanship hadn’t deteriorated in the slightest. They’d managed to mostly clear the fort of zombies, but there was still a giant army of skeletons outside. Holding this makeshift fort for any longer wasn’t feasible.

“Your Highness, I think it’s time we consider...” Barnack turned toward

Woroy, who was decapitating another group of zombies with his spear.

“Not yet. Blockade the hallways with whatever stone is remaining. We can think about giving up when we’ve run out of options. If that man was here, he’d say the same thing.”

“By ‘that man’ I assume you mean the Astral Fencer?”

“Yeah. Besides, if I let myself get killed that easily, Dad and Ivan’ll give me an earful. I’d be letting Ryuunie down too.”

“I suppose so.”

The Commonwealth Council had offered to fund Ryuunie’s education, so he was touring Meraldia’s cities to learn from the best scholars in each of them. Right now he was in Veira.

Woroy cut down another one of his zombified former subordinates, then started piling wooden crates up before more could show up. The other workers rushed over to help make the barricade. He stabbed another zombie who tried to climb over, then looked up at the gleaming moon.

“We’re just getting started!” Woroy howled.

As time passed, the number of skeletons swarming the narrow alleys increased.

“Whatever happens, don’t die! We can’t afford to let the enemy get any more zombies!” one of the workers shouted.

“Keep your shields up! Hey, someone treat this guy!” exclaimed another.

Kite was mentally preparing himself for death. Thanks to his epoch magic, he knew better than anyone just how dire their situation was. Dozens of Woroy’s men had already died. Most of them were people who’d been taken by surprise when one of their comrades was zombified. The ten or so people who’d died to arrows had gone on to wipe out more than five times their number. Moreover, the alleyway Kite and the others had holed up in was too narrow for group maneuvers. On top of that, visibility was low. If even one of the wounded men died, their formation would crumble.

“There’s nothing but skeletons outside!”

“Stay low! If you poke your head above the wall you’ll get shot down!” Woroy grabbed Kite and pushed him down. A second later a rusty arrow slammed into the wall above him.

“Your Highness, we can’t keep this up any longer! You have to run! If Barnack’s with you you should be able to get away!” Kite shouted, but Woroy didn’t even spare him a glance.

“My whole life, I’ve had my father and brother to protect me. And now, that guy’s the one protecting me.”

Kite knew instantly that Woroy was referring to Veight. Smiling confidently, Woroy mowed down a group of skeletons.

“So for once, let me be the one doing the protecting. Give me the chance to protect you guys.”

“Your Highness...”

Rubbing tears out of his eyes, Kite looked up at the sky. *I can’t let Woroy die.* He took out his beloved spellbook and started flipping through it, looking for something that might save them. But then a second later, he stopped.

“Huh?”

The mana above him began to undulate and twist. Looking up, all Kite saw was a glimmering full moon. But then, a tear in space appeared directly underneath the moon. Shocked, Kite shouted, “Veight!?”

A second later, a werewolf’s howl echoed through the battlefield.

Landing was a pretty painful affair. Honestly, I thought I was gonna die, falling 50 feet through the air like that.

“Looks like...I didn’t quite make it in time,” I muttered darkly as I landed atop the pile of stones Woroy had probably been using as a barricade. When I was a kid, I’d always wanted to be one of those heroes who comes in at the last second to save the day, but getting the timing right for that was harder than it seemed. Like now, where I’d come a little too late. If I’d made it back just a few hours sooner, no one would have died. But as it is, saving the people who were

still alive took precedence over lamenting the dead.

“Veight!” Kite shouted, waving at me. *Thank god you’re still safe.* Next to him, Woroy was cutting down skeletons left and right.

“Veight!? What are you doing here!?”

I swatted away an arrow coming for my face and said, “I’m here to save you.”

Time was of the essence, so I’d had Master teleport me here. Since she hadn’t known the precise elevation of this area, though, she’d erred on the side of caution and sent me high into the air. In her words “it’s better than being buried underground, is it not?” Fortunately, her coordinates had been spot-on. I should have expected no less from Master.

I absorbed the mana Master had lent me before teleporting me over, converting it into strength. We’d had a lot of free time in the forest, so she had been able to give me some one-on-one instruction for the first time in years. Thanks to that, I’d learned a fancy new necromancy spell.

I planted my fists onto the stone at my feet and imagined myself sucking up the earth’s energy. Since I’d only just learned this spell, I couldn’t cast it without going through the motions and speaking the incantation.

“Those without life, without voice, without might!” As I chanted, I raised my fist high. “This world belongs to those with life, with voice, with might! Hear my call, full of life and vigor!”

I sucked in a huge breath and howled as loudly as I could. My strongest spell, Soul Shaker, rippled through the air. This was my first time using it in conjunction with the new spell I’d learned, but it appeared that I pulled it off. My Soul Shaker altered the nature of the surrounding mana, causing it to interfere with the mana powering the skeletons. Skeletons were basically drones that were remote-controlled with the mana of their summoner, so my interference rendered them immobile.

This was the anti-undead Soul Shaker that Master had come up with. It worked pretty well, but from the looks of it, she’d made one big miscalculation. Instead of immobilizing the skeletons, my Soul Shaker crushed them into dust. Master had given me so much mana that the force of the spell obliterated all

undead in the area. Thanks to my enhanced werewolf vision, I could clearly see the skeletons disintegrating. All the undead around Woroy's makeshift fort had been annihilated with one spell. *Damn, this thing's strong. You've outdone yourself again, Master.*

"Well, that was anticlimactic," I muttered.

The men who'd been fighting for Woroy looked around in dumbfounded amazement, then stared up at me.

"Wh-What was that?"

"All the skeletons are gone..."

"Hey, isn't that the Black Werewolf King?"

"Hell if I know. I haven't visited a city in ages."

Woroy was the first to return to his senses. He raised his spear high and shouted, "Now's our chance! Everyone, charge! It's time to retake the fort!"

"R-Roger!"

"Yeah, let's block up the entrances while we've still got the chance!"

"Let's drive those undead fuckers outta here!"

The men brandished their axes and hammers, then ran off to shore up the fort's defenses. All the skeletons around the fort had been destroyed, and thanks to the influence of my Soul Shaker the remaining skeletons wouldn't be able to get close for some time. Adjusting the wavelength and frequency of my howl for the spell had been a brilliant idea. Actually doing it hadn't been as easy as Master made it seem, but now that I'd gotten the hang of it, I'd be able to switch up my Soul Shaker to interfere with all types of magic. This was my only strong spell, so it was nice to know I could make it more versatile.

"Veight!" Woroy turned to me, and I hopped off the stone barricade.

"I'm glad you're safe, Woroy."

"Sorry. Looks like I needed you to save my hide again."

Woroy was surprisingly calm, even though he'd been staring down a hopeless situation just a second ago. A short distance away, his men hoisted shields

made of wooden planks and ran toward the fort's entrance. It looked like they were filling up the gaps in the entrance with logs. The fact that Woroy had managed to keep these guys organized through this predicament said a lot about his skill as a commander.

As I went around treating the wounded, I praised Woroy for his quick thinking.

"You did an amazing job, Woroy. Not only did you manage to hold out, but you also kept casualties to a minimum."

However, Woroy sighed despondently, "I still let too many people die. I would have been better off forcing a retreat. We'd have lost fewer people that way, at least."

"That's not true." I firmly shook my head. "Master— I mean, the Demon Lord told me the surrounding cities are already under attack. If you'd run, there's no guarantee any of the other cities would have been able to take you in."

"I see... So holding out here was our only option."

The mastermind behind this invasion was apparently an undead Senator. His knowledge of Meraldia was based on what the country had been like when Eleora invaded, so he'd had no idea that a new city was being built here. His skeletons had actually already finished surrounding the nearby cities. It was only recently that they'd realized there was another one in the Fetid Wastes.

"Also, most of central Meraldia's under the enemy's spiritual influence."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means he can give complex orders to all undead within that region."

Honestly, I didn't know much about it either, but for necromancers, it was kind of like their zone of control.

"Battles between necromancers are sort of like a battle for territory. Since this region is under the enemy's control, we can't let anyone die within it."

Fortunately, my healing magic was able to stabilize even the mortally wounded. Once I finished healing the last wounded fighter, I turned to Woroy.

"Sorry I'm late. I got the news late because I was deep in the forest. You're

not hurt, are you?”

“Course not. I managed to survive fighting against you. No way these weak skeletons would ever get a scratch on me. More importantly, thanks for coming to my rescue and healing my men.” Woroy finally cracked a smile.

Still looking rather wary, Kite asked, “Umm, Veight? Where’s the Demon Lord?”

“Master’s gone to save the northern cities. They don’t have many necromancers, so they’ll need her help.”

“I guess that means the north is going to be just fine. What about the south though?”

“Come on, how could you forget? We’ve got two master necromancers in the south, remember?”

Melaine and Parker. I healed the scratch Kite had on his cheek, then smiled as confidently as I could to hide how bad I felt about coming late.

“Now then, it’s time for our counterattack. Let’s beat those undead back to the grave!”

“O-Okay!”

I hope that sounded confident enough. As soon as Parker got here, we’d be heading to the Boltz Mines to take down that undead Senator.

—The Seventeen Cities Counterattack—

Gomoviroa floated above northern Meraldia, observing the world below.

“He is spreading his control like a tree spreads its roots.”

As a fellow necromancer, she could make out the tendrils of dominance her foe was spreading from the base of his power in the Boltz Mines. He’d created a magical network, placing everything in its reach under his spiritual subjugation; anyone who died within the Senator’s territory would rise again as one of his loyal minions. Normally, constructing such a vast network would be impossible—it required far too much mana. Any average necromancer would have swooned upon seeing this, but Gomoviroa just shook her head with a sigh.

“Good grief. How can anyone make such amateur mistakes?” She waved her staff, sending ripples of mana down toward the roots. “You have all this power, but you have not the slightest inkling of how to use it. You lack training.”

It sounded more like she was grading a student’s test than fighting an enemy. Indeed, with how effortlessly Gomoviroa wiped out the Senator’s tendrils, she may as well have been.

“Your formation is an utter waste of mana, your techniques lack polish, and your spell is filled with errors. Worse, you have no understanding of how to properly control the dead. This is pathetic.”

She severed the roots’ lifelines, and they withered away in seconds. She then deployed a defensive barrier, protecting all of northern Meraldia from the roots’ incursion.

“I was worried when I saw how vast your mana stores were, but any of my disciples could put up more of a fight than you.” She smiled, puffing her chest out proudly. But then a second later, a worried frown crossed her face and she looked southward. “Be careful, my disciples. So long as you remember the fundamentals, you should be able to defeat a foe of this caliber.”

Around the same time, Melaine was engaging the skeleton army attacking her city of Bernheinen.

“Listen up, everyone!” she shouted to the vampire knights and vampire necromancers gathered before her.

“Bernheinen has been surrounded by an army of skeletons, but the real threat isn’t the undead at our gates. Don’t let yourselves be distracted, mages! Leave the skeletons to the knights!”

Melaine had been training under Gomoviroa longer than anyone, so she understood the current situation perfectly.

“Our enemy is trying to bring all of Meraldia under their spiritual control, and turn all its humans into undead. Of course they can’t affect us, but we won’t be able to survive if all the humans die.”

The vampires nodded unanimously. Humans were the vampires’ source of

food after all.

“Fortunately, every necromancer here has been personally trained by Master. If we combine our strength, we should easily regain spiritual control of Bernheinen.”

“As you command, Lady Melaine!”

All of the vampires in Bernheinen were lesser vampires who’d been turned by Melaine. Originally they’d been humans who were on the verge of dying due to disease or injury, or people who’d given up on living in human society. By turning them into vampires, Melaine had saved them. They were all fiercely loyal to her, and would gladly give their lives to protect hers.

Once she finished giving detailed instructions to her mages, Melaine turned to her knights.

“Your job is to keep the skeletons at bay. A vampire’s body is far sturdier than a human’s, so there’s no need to fear. Fight with the confidence befitting a vampire knight!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

The men raised their swords in unison. Their supernatural strength and nearly immortal bodies made them a force to be reckoned with. Pleased by the men’s high morale, Melaine smiled gently.

“We vampires no longer have the power to transform or fly freely through the sky. You could say we’re far weaker than our ancestors ever were. But thanks to our decline, we can now fight in broad daylight without needing to fear the sun.”

By giving up a number of their supernatural abilities, vampires had been able to nullify their many weaknesses, allowing them to survive the age of vampire hunts.

Melaine paused for a moment to reminisce, then continued her speech, “Moreover, we still have our ancestors’ immortality and their affinity for necromancy. The time has come for you to show me how much you’ve all grown as vampires!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Melaine watched with a smile as her men hurried to their respective posts. After a few seconds, she turned around and surveyed the skeleton army arrayed beneath the city walls.

“I don’t know who you are, but it’s obvious you’re drunk on your newfound power, so much so that you can’t even control it,” Honestly, Melaine wasn’t completely sure of that assessment, but she said it aloud to reassure herself. “I’m not afraid of your power. The people I studied with and the master I studied under are far stronger than you.”

Parker and Veight’s faces flashed through Melaine’s mind. She placed her hands on her hips, her cape flaring out majestically behind her.

“I’m no match for Master when it comes to necromancy and, well, even Parker’s just a little bit better than me, but...” In truth, Parker was as skilled in necromancy as Gomoviroa was, but Melaine had too much pride as the Great Sage’s first disciple to admit that. Mana started to coalesce around her as she drew a complex pattern of symbols in the air. “I’ve studied longer and harder than anyone else!”

She had been studying under Gomoviroa for decades now, having devoted her life to necromancy. The Lord of the Vampires danced through the air, spreading her mana throughout the city.

“I don’t know who you are or where you came from, but you’ll never match my resolve! I’ll eradicate anyone who threatens the future of the vampire clan!”

With each symbol she drew, Melaine expelled another one of the enemy’s curses from the city. Soon enough she’d crafted a spiritual barrier around Bernheinen’s walls to keep the opposing necromancer out. The necromancers under her command followed suit, creating their own, smaller spiritual barriers in various sectors of the city. Before long, every inch of the city was protected, not just the area around the walls.

“Now then, let’s carve ourselves a path out of here! We have to beat Parker to the Boltz Mines, or he’ll never let me hear the end of it!”

At Melaine’s command, her mages began expanding their barriers.



At around the same time, in a tiny corner of Ryunheit, Parker quizzically cocked his head. “I get the distinct feeling that someone is speaking ill of me right now... Is it Veight?”

He shook his head and turned his attention back to the grave in front of him. It was a monument honoring the 400 Thuvan soldiers that had died trying to retake Ryunheit. He quietly placed a bouquet of flowers on the gravestone. Parker had already brought all of Ryunheit back under his spiritual control. For someone of his caliber, spreading his influence over a city was child’s play.

“How far did I get again? Oh yes, I was telling you all about how Thuvan’s currently faring.” His tone was cheerful, as if he was conversing with a friend. “Firnir is doing a wonderful job of ruling Thuvan. She possesses all the qualities of a good leader, and she’s a hard worker. Thanks to her, I’m certain Thuvan will be at peace for a long time.”

Parker gently patted the gravestone.

“Now then, I’m sure you gentlemen are craving the opportunity to fight again. No warrior wants to meet their end fighting for a disgraced leader with no cause.” Spirits began to fill the graveyard. Sensing their presence, he said, “You know, I’m from the south, just like you guys. And despite how I act, I’m from quite a distinguished family.”

After confirming there were no living people nearby, Parker took a small silver ring out of his pocket. It bore the crest of the noble family he’d been a part of when he was alive.

Stroking the ring, Parker declared, “My name is Parker—Parker Pastier. I come from a line of viceroys who used to rule a now-ruined city. Though it was my younger brother who inherited my father’s position, so I’m afraid I have no title.”

The spirits began to stir, though they made no noise. While most of these dead soldiers had never heard the name Pastier, they could tell that Parker was speaking the truth.

Smiling, Parker asked, “What do you say, my fellow comrades? Are you willing to rise again and protect the peace Meraldia worked so hard to secure? If so,

then I shall grant you the strength to fight.”

The spirits acquiesced immediately. A second later, the air around the graveyard warped, and an army of skeletons appeared out of thin air. There were about 400 of them in total, and their breastplates all bore Thuvan’s crest. Almost every spirit buried here had answered Parker’s call and pledged themselves to him. For an average necromancer, gaining the cooperation of even a fifth of that number would be considered a momentous achievement.

Parker scratched his head and muttered to himself, “I see, so this is why Master always advocates speaking sincerely when dealing with spirits. If only I had been lucky enough to meet her while I was still alive... Well, I suppose there’s no point in grumbling about that now.”

Parker rose to his feet and bowed to the skeletons standing before him.

“Now then, it’s time to go protect Meraldia. If, along the way, you see any spirits who want to help, feel free to give them a call.”

One of the skeletons raised a tattered and faded standard bearing Thuvan’s colors. It fluttered resolutely in the chilly autumn breeze. By the time Parker reached Ryunheit’s front gates, his skeleton army had swelled to include the spirits of fallen Rolmund soldiers, Ryunheit’s deceased garrison troops, and even some of Ryunheit’s citizens.

In a dignified voice that none of his fellow disciples had ever heard before, he shouted, “We march to protect the demon capital, as well as all other lands belonging to the Meraldian Commonwealth. Open the gates!”

—The Departed Brother—

“Parker, have you been so lost in reading that you forgot to eat again?” My brother flung the curtains wide open.

“Food isn’t good for anything but giving my body the energy to move,” I said, covering my eyes with a pale hand. “It won’t cure my illness.”

“Even so, if you don’t eat your condition will get worse. The least you could do is try and take care of your health.” His affable voice felt suffocating in this dark, chilly room. I furrowed my eyebrows.

“Fine, fine. But don’t move anything on my desk. The order I’ve placed those books in is very important. Also, don’t touch any of the memos I’ve put between the pages.”

“Sure, as long as you eat properly,” he sighed. “You’re the eldest son of the Pastier family, you can’t let yourself go like this.”

“I already told you, I’m fine with you being the next viceroy. Father approves too.”

“Even so, you’re still my older brother. I’d like it if you at least tried to act like a better role model.”

Like a better role model, huh? I sighed to myself. Ever since I’d been afflicted with this disease, I’d spent my days poring over necromancy books. I could hardly be considered a model older brother.

“There you go again with your self-loathing. I wish you’d just smile, Parker. I’ve looked up to you for years, so it hurts to see you like this.”

Wait, what? You’ve looked up to me? That has to be a joke. I sneered derisively at myself. However, even that twisted smile seemed to satisfy my brother.

“See, now that’s more like it. Even if you don’t mean it, it’s better than seeing you look glum.”

“Are you always this bossy to people you look up to?”

I put on my gown and got out of bed. Standing up suddenly usually led to a seizure, so I had to slowly roll out while exerting myself as little as possible. It sounded easy, but it was surprisingly tricky. After I got to my feet I took a few seconds to catch my breath, then turned to face my brother again.

“So, what do you need? You skipped morning riding practice to come see me, so it must be something important, though I can’t imagine what.”

My brother’s voice dropped to a whisper and he said in a serious tone, “We received a top secret missive from Zaria. It seems war with the north is inevitable.”

“The Senate’s causing trouble again, huh? Will they attack our city as well?” I

asked.

“Most likely. There’s not much time left. Please evacuate, Parker. Veira or Lotz should be safe.”

“I’m a man of the Pastier family, I can’t just abandon this city’s people and flee alone.”

Despite what I said, I understood where my brother was coming from. I was too ill to be of any use in a fight. Nor did I have the strength left to command troops or negotiate with our allies. In fact, my body had atrophied so much I couldn’t even ride a horse. This city would be better off without me.

“Parker, I’m saying this for your own good. I’m just worried about your safety, okay?”

Can’t really argue with that.

“I know, I know.”

Defeated, I hung my head. However, there was one important piece of advice I needed to impart to my brother before I left. “I’ll do as you say, brother. But I must say, carve these words deep into your heart. You...”

It was there that my trip down memory lane came to an end. For whatever reason, I was incapable of remembering what happened next. The start of that sentence was my last memory of my life as a human. Afterwards, I managed to escape safely to another city. My research progressed smoothly, and soon enough I attained immortality. At least, that was what was written in the diary I’d apparently kept. I had only vague recollections of what happened after I departed my city. Moreover, after I became a skeleton I became unable to recall my younger brother’s name, or even his appearance. Both of those details were surgically removed from my memory. All I remembered now was his affable voice. It reminded me a little of Veight’s, actually. Especially the way he sounded when he was fed up with me. *Thinking back on it, maybe he looked like Veight too.*

“Hehehe...”

The skeletons around me reacted to my laughter. Of course, they didn’t show

any visible sign of it. An amateur necromancer wouldn't be able to tell, but I could sense that the flow of their mana shifted slightly for just an instant. I waved casually to them and said, "It's nothing, don't worry about it. Come, my comrades. My brothers are waiting for us."

I glanced in the direction of my hometown for a moment, then began marching towards the Boltz Mines.

Around the time Melaine and Parker began their advance, the northern cities started their counterattack as well.

"According to the Demon Lord, those skeletons no longer have any mana powering them. There's no one to give them orders, so we should be able to wipe them out!"

"They can't use our dead against us now, either! It's time to strike back!"

"Protect our city! Wipe these undead invaders out!"

Vongang's gates creaked open, and a platoon of heavy infantry marched on the horde of skeletons.

"Templar Knights, we must protect this holy sanctuary!"

A contingent of knights set out from Ioro Lange, the symbol of the Sonnenlicht Order painted on their shields. The city's archbishop, Obenius, nodded to himself as he saw them off. "Defeat these violent creatures of the dark, for the sake of Meraldians everywhere!"

"Yes, Your Holiness!"

The knights couched their spears and charged the skeleton army.

In Veira, Forne was rattling off instructions one after another.

"Listen well, my friends. You, Veira's honor guard, may look gaudy, but I know better than anyone that your swords and armor aren't just for show. I hand-picked you all for your skills on the battlefield. So go out there and show those old geezers from the other cities that your bite's far deadlier than your bark!"

"Your wish is our command, Lord Forne!"

“They’ll be telling tales of our ferocity for generations to come, my lord!”

Veira’s honor guard grinned, their resplendent armor shining in the noonday sun.

Dark clouds loomed over Bahen in the north. The city still hadn’t recovered from the invasion by the demon army’s Second Division, and the walls were in disrepair. Surrounding Bahen’s crumbling structures was a sturdy barricade made of dirt, and fighting within that barricade was a squad of dragonkin soldiers.

“Decapitate anyone who looks to be on the verge of death! If we allow them to die intact, they’ll rise again as enemies!” The crimson-scaled dragonkin warrior, Shure, shouted as she raised her saber. “Protect Bahen with your lives, men! The people within are our allies now! Don’t let even a single undead through!”

No reinforcements from Bahen came to help the dragonkin. The citizens were still wary of demons, having been invaded by giants and ogres just a year ago. Shure was aware of that as well, which was why she hadn’t asked for assistance and was holding the barricade with just her Crimson Scales unit. Thanks to her outstanding leadership, she’d been able to keep casualties to a minimum, but a few dragonkin had still died in the fighting. The dead dragonkin had all risen again as zombies, so Shure was having her medics decapitate anyone who was about to die to prevent them from resurrecting. Dragonkin were rational enough to accept such an order without complaint, but to the spectating humans, the battlefield seemed like a tragic hellscape.

However, after a few hours, the dead dragonkin stopped coming back as zombies. Moreover, the skeleton army’s assault began to lose momentum. Many of the skeleton soldiers simply stopped in their tracks, as if they’d forgotten what they were doing. Some even collapsed on their own.

“I see Her Majesty Gomoviroa has finally purified the land.” Taking advantage of the opening, Shure ordered, “Launch a counterattack! We need to thin the enemy’s numbers while they’re still docile!”

Just then, the gate behind Shure swung open.

A few minutes prior, Bahen's garrison troops were in the middle of a heated argument.

"Demons are out there protecting *our* city. Should we really just be sitting back and doing nothing?"

"Who cares about some filthy demons? It's thanks to them that our city's so busted up in the first place."

"I know, but last time we weren't able to protect our city. And now we're letting someone else protect it."

"Well...I get what you're saying."

The fact that they hadn't saved their city a single time was weighing on the soldiers. Just then, Bahen's viceroy, Cocteau, appeared. Though he was well past his prime, he was fully armed and armored. The soldiers looked shocked to see him dressed for war.

"My lord, why are you..."

His expression resolute, Cocteau declared, "I plan to head out and fight together with the demon army. If we continue to do nothing, then the people will lose faith in us. It is my job as viceroy to protect these people and I will not shirk my duty simply because we have aid!"

The soldiers began to panic.

"It's too dangerous, my lord! The skeletons outnumber us by far!"

"And yet, who is it out there fighting to protect us, despite the danger? The venerable soldiers of Bahen?"

"Err..."

"I hate demons as much as the rest of you. Even if dragonkin weren't directly responsible for what happened to my city, the fact remains that the demon army invaded Bahen. However..." Cocteau heaved a long sigh. "At this rate, I'll be the laughingstock of the Commonwealth Council. The man who relied on demons to defend his city, despite having one of the strongest forces in Meraldia at his disposal."

“But Lord Cocteau...”

Cocteau smiled at the soldiers. “I won’t force anyone to come with me. I’m joining this fight for the sake of my honor. I don’t fear death. In fact, dying protecting their people is how a viceroy should go!”

“Calm down, my lord! It’s utter folly to sortie on your own just to die!”

Cocteau shrugged off the soldiers who tried to stop him and drew his sword. He walked toward the main gate, his eyes burning with resolve. Seeing their viceroy’s bravery spurred the soldiers into action as well.

“Goddammit, I can’t just let him go out there alone!”

“Let’s do this, men! Not for those demons, but for our viceroy!”

“And for Bahen!”

The soldiers hadn’t forgiven the demons, but they still grabbed their weapons and ran after their leader. Thanks to the joint efforts of Bahen’s garrison and the dragonkin squadron, they were able to annihilate all the skeletons around the city. Each city used their garrison, whatever mercenaries they could hire, and the knights under the Commonwealth Council’s direct command to strike back against the invaders. Once the skeletons were defeated, each city sent their armies toward the Boltz Mines.

He was beginning to panic. By all rights, the tendrils he’d sent out should have covered all of Meraldia by now. That was just how much mana he had. In fact, he’d expected to put parts of southern Rolmund under his control as well. And yet, his attempts had been stymied at every turn.

His greatest strength was his tendrils. By spreading them far and wide, he would have been able to raise an unlimited army of undead to control as he wished. It was for that reason that he’d poured so much of his mana into them. However his tendrils had all been cut down, and he was unable to recover the mana he’d invested.

At present, there were four main threats that he’d identified. The biggest threat was the mage who had spread her control throughout all of northern Meraldia. Not only could she decimate his tendrils with ease, but her control of

mana was also superb. Moreover, she seemed to have access to a limitless supply of it.

The next biggest threats were the two mages advancing from the south. Neither of them possessed exceptionally large reserves of mana, but they'd still been able to efficiently eliminate his tendrils. Both of them were slowly making their way here, and they seemed to have a lot of troops under their command. Moreover, the mage advancing from the southeast was able to pinpoint his tendrils' weak points as easily as the unbelievably powerful mage in the north. In order to prevent this from happening any further, he'd sent an army of skeletons to the south, but their advance had been halted. Though he was dying to know why, his connection to those skeletons was being interrupted. Most likely by the final threat he'd identified, which was currently in central Meraldia.

This final foe didn't appear to be a necromancer, but their mysterious attacks were capable of obliterating both his skeletons and his tendrils. It took a lot of mana to raise those skeletons, so each one he lost was less mana he could spend on creating new tendrils. As this foe was able to destroy thousands of skeletons in a single attack, it required a lot of time and mana to keep raising enough undead to keep his adversary at bay. Every one of these threats was a force to be reckoned with. At present, they'd managed to sever his tendrils around all 17 of Meraldia's cities. While he could still send more out into other areas, there was no point in investing mana into uninhabited regions. Places without people had no spirits, and undead couldn't be summoned without spirits. At this rate, he would soon run out of mana. Worse, he was losing more of his tendrils by the minute. After some deliberation, he was forced to accept that he needed to change tactics.

—The Skeleton Situation—

I partially paid attention as Parker explained necromancy to Kite.

“Normally, when I summon skeletons I use certain spells to force them to serve me for a short period of time. They're sort of like part-time workers. But the skeletons that Master and Melaine summon are bound by lasting contracts that allow them to stay on this plane for much longer.”

“I’m guessing their method takes a lot longer?”

“That it does. They have to speak with each spirit individually—learn how they died, what regrets they have left, and so on. Then, they have to convince that spirit to work for them.”

Parker was a powerful necromancer who’d crossed the final threshold, so the amount of “part-time workers”—as he put it—that he could summon at once was far greater than any other necromancer. A human necromancer would be lucky to get even a dozen using his method. Of course, if I pointed that out he’d get even more full of himself, so I kept my mouth shut.

Meanwhile, Parker continued with his explanation, “My guess is the skeletons our enemy is summoning are the same ‘part-time worker’ type. They’re being forced to serve him because of his spells, so if you sever the connection between him and his skeletons, the spirits will leave.”

“Oh, so that’s why they all fell apart when you showed up!” Kite exclaimed.

He was naturally an attentive listener, so he paid attention to anything anyone had to say. *But really, you can just ignore this guy if you’re getting tired of him, you know*, I thought. Parker had brought his skeleton army to rescue us a few hours back, and now we were all on our way to the Boltz Mines. Woroy and his workers had elected to tag along as well. Their fury hadn’t abated in the slightest, and they wouldn’t be satisfied until they got back at the guy who’d sent the invaders. By the time we arrived at the Boltz Mines, armies from all over had gathered around the mountain’s base.

“This is the Veira Honor Guard’s camp! You’re messing up our formation so go set up somewhere else!”

“Screw you, peacock knights! You’re the ones getting the way of Vest’s formation!”

“Actually, you’re both getting in our way. Thuvan’s kentauros were the first ones here,” Firnir sighed.

“A-Are you Lady Firnir, Thuvan’s viceroy!?”

“I never imagined the viceroy herself would ride into battle... My deepest apologies!”

Looks like I need to give Firnir a stern talking to. She's starting to abuse her authority for petty reasons. At Master's request, the cities closest to the Boltz Mines had sent their armies here to invade the enemy necromancer's stronghold and bring him down. Meraldia's 17 cities were codependent and traded with each other frequently, so they would all suffer if skeletons were left to roam the highways. Hence, when Master had paid them a visit, they'd all eagerly agreed to this joint assault.

The only thing I didn't understand was why Woroy was commanding the troops from the northern cities. He turned to the human soldiers and shouted, "If this drags out into a battle of attrition, we'll be at a disadvantage! Those of you who're used to mountain fighting, follow me! We need to gain control of the path leading into the mines as soon as possible!"

Firnir, who'd been planning to lead the vanguard herself, hurriedly shouted, "Ah, what about me!? Can I join the—"

"Lady Firnir, your specialty lies in fighting on flat ground. You and your kentauros should secure the surroundings."

"Aww..." Firnir's head drooped.

As much as I wanted to console her, Woroy was right. He led the former bandits and nomads who'd made these mountains their home on a swift assault. Naturally, I joined them.

"Let me help you out, Woroy—though I need to save my Soul Shaker for when we really need it."

"Sure, and thanks!" Woroy flashed me a boyish grin.

You really love fighting, huh? From behind I heard Firnir shout, "Hey, how come you get to go but I don't!? That's not fair, Vaito!" but I ignored her. Parker and Melaine were taking care of the necromancy part of the fight, so Woroy and I just had to focus on mowing down the skeletons in our way. It seemed like Woroy was trying to compete with me, but in my werewolf form I was way stronger than him. That being said, my strengthening magic helped boost him to ridiculous levels as well.

"I can feel the power flowing through me! This brings me back to the nue

hunt we did in Wa, Veight!”

“Less reminiscing; more fighting.”

Woroy swung his spear in a wide arc, cutting through a swathe of skeletons and sending their bones tumbling to the earth below. He then thrust forward, piercing straight through three skeletons and their shields.

“Did you see that!?”

“Lord Woroy’s insane!”

“Step it up lads, or we’ll be left behind!” he shouted.

Woroy’s men’s morale surged, and they ran after him with renewed vigor. I was able to heal anyone who got injured almost instantly, so our momentum didn’t falter in the slightest. Because I was splitting my time between healing and fighting, I wasn’t actually taking down as many skeletons as Woroy. *Man, this reminds me of how hard it is to DPS as a healer in MMOs.*

Behind me I could hear the remaining northern Meraldian soldiers getting heated up.

“We can’t let a Rolmund prince show up Meraldia’s soldiers! Follow them, men!”

“Show them the might of Meraldia’s regular army!”

Please stop competing with your allies, guys. I’m the one who’s gonna have to break you up if you get into an actual fight. I occasionally shot glances behind me to make sure the soldiers weren’t fighting amongst each other while kicking the crap out of the skeletons. Since I didn’t have to worry about holding back against a bunch of undead, this was the first fight where I had the chance to go all out. Unfortunately, I had too many other responsibilities to take advantage of this opportunity.

“See how strong my little brother is!? Veight’s the greatest user of strengthening magic I’ve ever seen! He really understands how people’s bodies are made, which is why...”

Oh god, I can hear Parker now too.

“Outta my way! Dammit, there’s no more skeletons for me to kill!

Whyyyyyy!?”

And now Firnir’s complaining. Why are all my friends like this? Still, it was quite a sight to behold; northern soldiers and demons all fighting their way up the mountain together. Also, no one else seemed to have noticed yet, but Master was here now too. She was floating far above us, and was engaged in a magical duel against the enemy commander. It was thanks to her that he wasn’t summoning any more skeletons to replace the ones we were killing. *Now’s our chance.* As soon as we reached the mine entrance, we split up into multiple teams and went down each of the tunnels. From here on out, it was the northern cities’ garrison troops’ time to shine. They were used to fighting in narrow spaces, and capturing strongholds was their specialty.

“Keep them trapped in that corner! Someone bring me a light!”

“Push them back with your shields! Compared to knocking out rampaging drunks, this is nothing!”

“We’ll circle around the adjoining mineshafts and pincer the enemy! Oi, peacock knights, keep them busy here!”

“You better hurry it up, you old Vest fogies! Or else we’ll clear the enemy out before you can get here!”

I can’t tell if they’re becoming friends or rivals. I left subjugating the tunnels to the soldiers and had Kite guide me to the hidden room where he’d first found the goblet. The skeletons guarding the route there were stronger than the others I’d faced, but they were still no match for a werewolf, especially since I could use the walls, ceilings, and footholds to launch attacks from all directions. Meanwhile, the skeletons couldn’t run up walls or leap down from the ceiling, so I only had to worry about attacks from the ground.

“Well that was easier than I expected,” I muttered as I crushed the last skeleton soldier into dust. Kite timidly poked his head out behind me.

“I think that’s just because you’re crazy strong, Veight.”

“When I was studying with Master, she made me wrestle with her undead all the time.”

All of her test subjects were skeletons and zombies, and it had been my job to

“dispose” of them once her experiments were finished. I was used to this by now.

“Unlike Parker, these guys’ joints only move in the same ways human joints do. If you learned the trick to it, you’d be able to take these guys out with ease too.”

“You make it sound like it’s as easy as shelling crawfish, but I really don’t think it is.”

As we bantered, I spotted the corpse with the goblet in the distance. I figured he might have summoned some undead master swordsman or something to guard him, but he was defenseless. *What a letdown.*

“I used epoch magic to investigate that goblet, and as far as I can tell, it’s gone inert. Did it run out of mana?” Kite mused.

“I don’t know, but don’t let your guard down. Master’ll be bringing Ryucco as soon as the area’s secure. We can recover the artifact once they’re here.”

The more I looked at it, the more that goblet seemed identical to the one we’d found in Wa. *We need to get to the bottom of this mystery before something worse happens.*

—Invasion—

This was the moment he’d been waiting for. His first host had been an abject failure, having used the corpse because he lacked any other options, but it had proved incompatible. There was nothing left in the corpse’s spirit but anger and resentment. While his host had been decently intelligent, it had been so obsessed with revenge that it wasn’t able to put that intelligence to use. Starting with summoning an army of skeletons had been utter folly. What his host *should* have done was spread its tendrils in secret to avoid detection.

He swore that he would pick his next host more carefully. Moreover, he would take complete control of his host, to prevent them from doing anything stupid. He concluded that was the only way to complete his directive of creating a Hero. After updating his criteria for a new host, he checked to see if anyone in his surroundings fit them.

“This is the vessel you recovered? There are no mages among the dragonkin, so unfortunately we won’t be able to help you analyze it.”

A human-sized demon with a lizard’s face was peering into him. *Criteria not met.* By design, he could only choose humans as hosts.

“As far as I can tell, it’s like Ason’s Legendary Treasure in that it absorbs the surrounding mana.” A human male replied to the demon.

Analyzing... Mana capacity: Average. Intelligence: High. Wisdom: High. The human was a suitable host, but unfortunately he was a magician. *Criteria not met.* In order to prevent any unexpected interactions with his mana, he was not allowed to choose mages as hosts.

“But whoever made this didn’t make the goblet Ason found. I’m almost certain a destruction mage made that one, since it sucks mana up from the environment. This one, on the other hand, absorbs mana from the spirits of the dead, so it was probably made by a necromancer.”

A small rabbit paw tapped his metallic side. The sensation was rather unpleasant. Unfortunately, he possessed no means by which to exhibit his displeasure. *Criteria not met.* Not only was this potential target a demon, but he was also a mage. Everyone around him was incompatible, it seemed.

“Kurtz, powerful magical artifacts tend to inherit the traits and ideologies of their creator, which is why it’s entirely possible for two objects created in completely different ways to share the exact same function.”

The man who’d spoken just now was exceptionally incompatible. Though he looked human, he was a demon and a mage. Moreover, his mana capacity appeared to be infinite. Were the goblet able to choose this man, he would be able to create a Hero far greater than any other, but sadly he couldn’t.

“The crafting style is Rolmund’s... There doesn’t seem to be a name engraved on it anywhere, so let’s call it Draulight’s Legacy for now. It was probably brought over by one of the escaped slaves Draulight led here.”

The goblet felt a small surge of nostalgia upon hearing the name Draulight, but he didn’t let that distract him from his search.

“According to Eleora’s letter, this goblet is a relic from ancient times. It was

found in some ancient ruins centuries ago, and was kept in a noble family's vault for generations. On the other hand, Ason's Legendary Treasure had been hidden somewhere within the Windswept Dunes."

"Meaning these goblets were created by different people on opposite ends of the continent. My guess is the Old Dynasty was actively having their most skilled sorcerers make these throughout their empire."

The lizard-demon brought his face closer to the goblet, making him feel even more uncomfortable.

The demon with the infinite mana capacity sighed and said, "If Ason's Legendary Treasure is a tool to create Heroes, then Draulight's Legacy is probably the same. There were probably dozens of Heroes running around the continent during the Old Dynasty's reign."

A human woman suddenly joined the conversation, "We had our hands full dealing with just one Hero, I can't imagine what would happen if there were more... Why is everyone so obsessed with making Heroes?"

Though she sounded like a petulant child, the goblet still dutifully examined her. *Analyzing... Mana Capacity: High. Intelligence: High. Wisdom: Average. An outstanding candidate.* Sadly she, too, was a mage, which made her ineligible. If the goblet had a mouth, he would have sighed.

The infinite mana demon smiled and replied, "Heroes are powerful enough that they can conquer castles and cities faster than any army. If it wasn't for the old Demon Lord, Arshes would have destroyed our castle as well."

"So you believe the Old Dynasty crafted these goblets to create a corps of living siege weapons?"

"Keep in mind this is simply a theory, Kurtz. But I think it's a plausible one."

The goblet ignored their conversation. His sole objective was to create a Hero. What that Hero did was no concern of his.

"I wanted to analyze the necromancy the goblet's capable of using, but Master already returned to the forest..."

"Umm, you guys said you were in the middle of negotiating with someone,

right?”

“Yeah, we found this new race of demons called fungoids. They know more about the depths of the forest than anyone.”

The infinite mana demon’s smile clouded over a little.

“They’re not used to outsiders, so we had to take one of their trials before they’d even talk to us. We managed to clear it, but were interrupted before we could start actual negotiations.”

“Hey, Veight, what do those fungoids look like?”

“They look exactly like you’d expect them to. Big, walking mushrooms. They’re actually kinda cute, but they don’t taste very good.”

“You ate some!?”

“Recycling the nutrients of their dead is one of their customs. When we cleared their trial, they made us mushroom soup from their corpses. Honestly, I’m trying to wipe that experience from my memory...” The infinite mana demon shook his head with a sigh. “Anyway, Master’s off in the forest, and Parker’s gone with Woroy. He said he wants to guard the city until it’s complete in case more skeletons show up.”

“So there’s no necromancers in the capital right now?” the lizard-faced demon asked.

Just then, another person rushed into the room.

“Yes there are! Don’t forget about me, the Great Sage Gomoviroa’s first disciple!”

“Melaine, you’re late.”

“It’s not my fault! Guarding Bernheinen with just vampires wasn’t easy! By the time I reached the Boltz Mines, you guys had wrapped things up and gone home!”

At first glance, the newcomer appeared human. As the goblet analyzed her, the infinite mana demon replied, “Didn’t Master give you three thousand skeleton soldiers to use too?”

“They were overwhelmed in the initial assault.”

After a brief moment of silence, the infinite mana demon sighed, “Melaine, would it kill you to learn even a little bit about tactics?”

“Why bother? All you need to do is throw your army at the enemy army, right?”

“You could have at least had them stay within your walls and help defend against the siege...”

“Don’t give me that disappointed look! I’m a mage, not a strategist!”

“I’m a mage too, you know...”

In fact, this room was filled with mages. The people here were as powerful as the mages the goblet had seen in the Old Dynasty.

The woman’s shoulders slumped and she petulantly replied, “Well, I can’t be good at everything like you. So spare me the military lectures...”

“Fine, but give command of Master’s skeleton soldiers to one of your vampire knights, then. Delegating tasks to the right people is part of a viceroy’s job.”

“Fiiiiine...”

Despite her human appearance, this woman was a demon as well. Not only that, but she was also a necromancer. The goblet was incompatible with all mages, but especially with necromancers. He decided to wait patiently until someone he could use showed up.

That evening, a new person appeared before him.

“So this is the magical goblet they recovered?”

She was a human woman, and judging by the flow of her mana, she wasn’t a mage. *Analyzing... Mana Capacity: High. Intelligence: High. Wisdom: High. Finally, a candidate I can use.* The goblet immediately began its invasion of the woman’s mind. Because the corpse had been gripping the goblet, people seemed to have misunderstood his capabilities. He could invade anyone in the vicinity, even if he wasn’t in direct contact with them. He slipped past the woman’s consciousness and took root inside her memories. *Her name is...Airia*

Lutt Aindorf. And she appears to be a viceroy, a ruler of some sort. Splendid. The goblet found it strange that someone who wasn't a mage was allowed to serve as a ruler, but he didn't dwell on it.

"Ngh!?"

His new host groaned and fell to her knees. Her mana capacity was huge, but her body wasn't terribly sturdy. He would need to handle her with care.

"What's wrong, Lady Airia!?"

The female human mage he'd witnessed earlier in the day hurriedly ran over to his host. *I can't let anyone suspect me.* He quickly rifled through his host's memories and picked out the ones relevant to this woman. Her name was Lacy, and his host's impression of her was "A laid-back but earnest individual." She was apparently also a master of illusion magic. He took over his host's body and crafted an innocuous reply, using past conversations with Lacy as a reference point.

"I'm sorry, Lacy. It's just...when I think of how many people died because of this goblet, I feel a little overwhelmed."

Considering his host's personality, the goblet considered this the optimal response. However, he didn't like saying those words. They were an affront to him and the necromancers who'd made him. Still, the reply succeeded in deceiving Lacy.

"I see... Ryunheit didn't suffer any casualties, but many of the merchants and pilgrims who were on the road when the skeletons attacked were killed. There's also the knights who died fighting them... This really was a tragedy, wasn't it?"

"Yes. To think something like this would happen right after we achieved peace... I'm feeling a little tired, so I'm going back to my room."

"Of course. Good night, Lady Airia."

The goblet controlled his host's limbs and headed toward her quarters. He'd finally found the perfect host. There was no need to rush things. His previous host had depleted most of his mana reserves, but if he spread his tendrils out surreptitiously, he'd be able to recover some of his stockpile. Eventually, he'd slaughter all the residents of this city and absorb their mana. He felt fulfilled

knowing he was finally accomplishing what he'd been designed for.

—Airia's Torment—

Someone has been controlling my body since last night. I'm pretty sure it's whatever was in that magic goblet. I heard from Kite that it had gone dormant, but I guess something must have caused it to reactivate. If the goblet is the true mastermind behind the skeleton invasion, does that mean the dead Senator was just another victim? I can't move or speak, so all I can do right now is analyze what information I have and wait for an opportunity. The being that's possessed me doesn't respond to my questions, but I know it's reading my thoughts and memories. It went to sleep around the time I usually go to sleep and woke up when I normally wake up. And now, it's picking my favorite perfume without hesitation, and placing one drop on the inside of each ankle, like I always do.

A few seconds later, my maid Marma enters the room. She picks up on the scent of my perfume and gives the bottle a curious look. As she's still in her teens, she doesn't own any perfume of her own yet.

"You use that perfume a lot, Lady Airia. You must really like it."

"Yes, I'm rather fond of it. So much so that I have to take care not to apply too much."

"You always use just one drop, right?"

"Indeed. I make sure never to change the amount, or it might be too light or too strong. I've gotten used to the scent myself, so I can't rely on my nose for that."

"Wow, that's really smart, Lady Airia!"

The goblet is able to converse with my maid without attracting suspicion. I'm trying my best to somehow let her know that it's not me, but the goblet's preventing me from taking any actions it doesn't permit. I was able to belt on my sword of my own free will, but I can't draw it.

Wait, I shouldn't be trying to alert Marma; that will just put her in danger. This goblet can take over people's bodies and read their minds. But then, who

should I be trying to tell? There's only a few people strong enough to resist this goblet. Thankfully, I'll be meeting one of them at breakfast. If I can just give Veight a sign that something's off, I'm sure he'll be able to figure out the rest. While I'm trying to formulate a plan, the goblet continues conversing with my maid.

"Marma, are you interested in having perfume of your own?"

Marma's face goes red.

"O-Oh no, I'm too plain for perfume! Besides I don't have enough money to— Ah, forget I said that!"

Marma's family is poor, so most of her wages go to supporting them. I want to give her one of my perfume bottles, but I still can't move my body. However, the moment I think that, my hand picks up an unopened bottle.

"I bought this perfume some time back, but the scent is too floral for me. I think it would suit you perfectly though, Marma. If you'd like, you can have it."

"Huh!? There's no way perfume that's too much for you would smell good on me!"

Despite her refusal, Marma's gaze is glued to the bottle. The goblet plasters on a smile and offers the perfume to her.

"No, I really do think it would smell great on you. If you end up not liking it, you can always sell it. You don't have to feel obligated to keep it. I just wanted to thank you for all your hard work over the years."

"Th-Thank you very much!"

Blushing to the tips of her ears, Marma tentatively accepts the bottle. The life of a maid is a difficult one. You need to be patient, clever, and learn the proper manners for all sorts of formal occasions. Plus, sometimes werewolves jump through the window of the room you're cleaning. Besides, Marma has put up with me grumbling about my work for years now. I feel like I should repay her kindness somehow.

That aside, it seems the goblet has mastered the art of acting like me. As things stand, no one will notice anything off. I continue desperately trying to

come up with a plan of some sort while my legs carry us to the dining room.

“Good morning, Airia.”

Veight greets me with a cheerful smile. He still has his bed head, but the sloppy hairstyle looks oddly fitting on him. He’s wearing a rather strange shirt too. I have no idea where he was able to buy something like that. At first, I thought all werewolves had a weird sense of fashion, but now I know it’s just him. The others all wear normal clothes. Still, he manages to look good in whatever he wears so I can’t wait to see what strange new style he’ll try next. The goblet greets Veight the way I usually would.

“Good morning, Veight. Did you sleep well?”

“Yeah, nothing beats sleeping at home... Err, sorry. I know this is your house; I didn’t mean to imply anything rude.”

“Oh, not at all. If anything, I’m glad you think so highly of this mansion. This is as much your home as it is mine,” the goblet replies with a smile. It’s even mimicking my expressions perfectly. For a moment, I’m glad the goblet isn’t embarrassing me in front of Veight. Unfortunately, this means he won’t realize anything’s off, which is a problem.

We sit down at the table and start eating breakfast. Like always, Veight spends a few minutes debating whether or not to spread his soft-boiled egg’s yolk over the rest of his food.

“I’ll be meeting with the demon army’s technical officers later this morning. I should be done by lunchtime, so I’ll let you know if we learn anything new then.”

The goblet replies without hesitation, “Very well. I need to write up my reply to the Merchant Guild’s petition this afternoon. The Jeweler’s Guild is feuding with the canine craftsmen, and they want me to resolve the dispute.”

Everything it said is true. How can I signal to Veight that something’s off if it’s this good at copying me? I struggle as hard as I can against the goblet’s bindings, but I can’t even get my fingers to drop my fork. Still, I keep looking for some way to regain control of my body, even if only for an instant.

Meanwhile, Veight smiles and says, "Your perfume smells quite nice today."

"Yes, this is my favorite scent."

"I like it too. It's really relaxing."

Despite the crisis I'm in, hearing that is enough to make my day. Veight nods with a smile, then takes out a small piece of paper. He jots down a quick memo and calls Kite over.

"Kite, take care of this before my meeting please."

"Sure. Err... Oh. Alright, I'm on it."

Kite skims over the memo, then nods. Nothing seems out of the ordinary. The goblet makes small talk with Veight, and breakfast passes like always.



As Veight dabs at his face with a napkin, he looks me in the eyes and says, “By the way...”

“What is it?” The goblet smiles.

His expression perfectly even, he asks, “Who are you?”

For a moment, the goblet freezes up. After a few long, painful seconds it finally manages to croak out, “I’m not sure I...understand what you mean.”

“Exactly what I said.” Veight’s expression grows dark. He points his fork at me and rests his chin on his hand. “*You* are not Airia. You may have copied her almost perfectly, but I know it’s not her.”

Yes, exactly! Don’t be fooled, Veight! Sadly, I’m unable to shout that out loud, but internally I scream it with all my might. Still, knowing that Veight’s seen through the goblet’s disguise brings me an immense amount of relief. There’s nothing to worry about anymore. He’ll be able to solve everything.

Veight looks down at my plate. “Airia’s the kind of person that’ll clean her plate, no matter what’s on it. But she absolutely hates boiled carrots. I know, because she always makes a face whenever she’s eating them.”

I thought I did a pretty good job of hiding that, but I guess I can’t fool Veight. There’s just something about the smell of boiled carrots that I can’t stand.

“Today, you ate those carrots without complaint, and I could tell from your smell that you weren’t trying to hide your disgust, either.”

I give off a smell like that normally? That’s so embarrassing!

Unaware of my inner turmoil, Veight grins and adds, “Also, when Airia eats shrimp she devours everything including the tail. I was pretty surprised the first time I saw her do it in Wa.”

That’s because you eat shrimp the same way! I thought that was how you were *supposed* to do it! I want to bury my face in my hands, but they won’t move. Instead, the goblet opens my mouth and replies, “I’ve just gotten used to the taste. I’m not a child, you know.”

“I see. How very admirable of you.”

Don't be fooled, Veight! Just as I'm thinking that he gets to his feet and walks over. The goblet tenses my muscles, ready to take flight at a moment's notice. Veight brings his face very, very close to mine. What are you doing!?

"Also, Airia often puts on perfume before breakfast, but only if she has meetings planned for later in the day. The scent takes time to settle."

I told him that ages ago. I'm surprised he still remembers.

"However, on days that Airia has no meetings, she doesn't put on perfume. Werewolves have sensitive noses, so she tries to avoid wearing scents around me."

You noticed that?

"Unlike yesterday, Airia has no meetings today. Her work consists solely of paperwork. And yet, you're wearing perfume. Moreover, when I brought the topic up earlier, you didn't mention any special reason for that."

Veight's face is so close to mine that I feel like I might pass out. The only other time I've seen him act this forceful was when we first met. But now, he's acting like this because he's worried about me.

"Judging by the changes in your emotions, I imagine the real Airia is in there somewhere? You're not copying Airia's appearance, you've taken over her actual body. You're going to pay dearly for messing with her."

Veight grabs my wrist before the goblet has time to react. He pulls me forward, and I fall into his arms. A feral grin spreads across his face and he snarls, "Don't worry, Airia. I'll save you, no matter what."

A second later, the goblet makes its move.

"Haah!"

With a strength I didn't know I possessed, it wrenches my wrist free from Veight's grasp. He lets go rather easily, probably to avoid hurting me. It then draws my sword and launches two consecutive horizontal swings. It's even memorized the Sashimael Style that I learned! Of course a novice swordsman like me wouldn't stand a chance against Veight on even the best of days, but the attack bought the goblet enough time to use magic.

As it starts gathering its mana, Veight points out, “You’re probably hoping to kill some of the maids in the mansion and revive them with necromancy, but you’re wasting your time. I ordered Kite to get everyone out of the mansion. He’s probably evacuated the nearby residents as well.”

So that’s what the memo he gave Kite earlier was all about. This whole conversation was just to buy time.

Veight transforms and bares his fangs at me. “Don’t underestimate the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander, Draulight’s Legacy. I saw through your foolish plot from the very beginning.”

The goblet doesn’t say anything. It keeps my sword pointed at Veight, but it doesn’t seem like it’s going to attack again. Veight doesn’t look like he wants a fight, either. If he’s really seen through all of the goblet’s tricks, then why did he reveal that he was onto it? Or is there something he still doesn’t know, and he was hoping to bait it into giving that away? In his werewolf form, I can’t really read his expression, but I can tell that he’s furious. I feel bad for making him worry this much about me.

A second later my vision goes blurry as the goblet hurls my body through the window at inhuman speed.

“Airia! Hey you bastard, be gentler with her body! I don’t care if you’re some legendary artifact. If you hurt even one hair on her head, I’ll melt you down! Ryucco, have you managed to trace the source yet!?”

This is the first time I’ve heard Veight sound so panicked. A second later, he lets out a loud howl, and his werewolves howl back from all across the city. He must have had them spread out when he found out what was going on. Humans used to fear the howling of werewolves, but right now it’s the most reassuring thing in the world. As the howls echo in my ears, the goblet dashes into a deserted alley in order to shake off pursuit.

The moment the goblet leapt out of the window, I howled to my werewolves to give chase. It could strengthen Airia’s body all it wanted, but it couldn’t erase her scent—meaning that it would never be able to escape. Honestly, I wanted to join the pursuit myself, but I kept my feelings in check. With Airia absent, I was acting viceroy of Ryunheit; I couldn’t leave the city leaderless. Besides, the

moment I'd discovered something strange was happening with Draulight's Legacy, I asked my mages to start investigating.

The first thing they'd discovered was that the goblet had vanished from the locked room it was stored in. Worse, it had managed to bypass all of the detection wards Kite had placed around said room. Originally, I'd thought he was being paranoid, but it appeared he'd had the right idea. Regardless, the fact that this goblet could circumvent Kite's wards meant that it was specialized for stealth.

"Sorry, I didn't think this would happen..." Kite muttered despondently as he walked over. I gave him a reassuring pat on the back.

"Don't worry about it, we were all fooled. If this thing's only purpose was to make Heroes, it wouldn't have such advanced stealth capabilities. I wonder what reason this goblet's creator had for adding all these features."

Maybe it was meant to be a Trojan horse of sorts. Send it to the enemy's leader as a gift, then watch as it destroys their city from the inside. It wouldn't make sense to drain mana from your own citizens, after all. If you had to kill half of your own population to make a Hero, you'd end up with a war between your new Hero and the survivors. But if you sent this goblet to a rival city and had it make a Hero out of one of your own spies, or maybe one of the city's prisoners, you'd be able to kill two birds with one stone. Creating the Hero would drain your enemy of resources, and the new Hero would be able to instantly attack his target. I got the feeling that this was something that had been created near the end of the Dynasty's reign.

Regardless, if my hunch about its purpose was right, then Airia was in grave danger. *Now then, how to handle this?* As I was thinking, Melaine burst into my room, panting heavily. She'd been planning on returning to Bernheinen today, so she was in traveling clothes.

"Veight, you said there's an emergency!?"

"Yeah, Airia's been..."

I gave Melaine a quick summary of what had happened. Her face grew paler the more I talked, and the moment I finished she sprinted out of the room.

“Someone, send a runner to Bernheinen! Tell all the vampires stationed there to come to Ryunheit at once! Also, someone get in touch with Parker!” she shouted as she ran. Melaine might not be the best strategist, but when it came to dealing with necromancy, I knew I could count on her.

Just then, Ryucco came back to the room, a map of Ryunheit in one hand. “Hey, Veight, I know where that blasted cup went.”

“Really!?”

“Yeah. Kite cast a tracker on it in case someone tried to take it out of the room. Right now, it’s underground, beneath Ryunheit’s old residential district. Chances are it’s in the sewers.”

“The sewers, huh?”

It would be hard to organize a search down there. Ryucco seemed to be thinking the same thing, as he let out a weary sigh. “It made Airia drop it down the gutter last night, and now it’s probably making her retrieve it. The stupid thing can’t move on its own, and she would have looked too conspicuous carrying it around.”

“So if we head to the sewers, we’ll be able to catch Airia.”

“Now hang on a second.” Ryucco held up a hand to stop me. “Airia’s just being controlled. That damned thing is where its consciousness is actually stored. You haven’t seen what it can do when it brings all of its mana to bear. It’s too dangerous to get close!”

I mulled over Ryucco’s words for a few seconds, then turned to Kite.

“Any word from the werewolves?”

“Umm, they said Airia’s scent suddenly vanished near the old district’s canal. There’s an underground tunnel that connects to the sewers there. They said they’ll keep their distance and track her through the sewers.”

Ryucco tugged on my pant leg and said in a panicked voice, “H-Hey, you better not be thinking of going down there. I dunno how much mana that cup’s got left, but you know necromancy’s got instant kill spells too, right?”

“I know. And I have to fulfill my duties as Airia’s substitute until this whole

situation is resolved.”

Still holding onto my pants, Ryucco muttered, “Its specialty is camouflage and mind control. It was probably hoping we’d take it somewhere where there’s a bunch of people so it could find someone to take over.”

“How devious.”

Kite shot me a worried and glanced meekly muttered, “Umm, Veight? You need to calm down.”

I gave him what I hoped was a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry, I am calm.”

“Err, umm...”

He looked down at my hand, and I followed his gaze. It seemed I’d been gripping the table so hard that I’d pulverized the wood. Also, I only just realized that I was still transformed. It seemed I was way less calm than I thought. A mage’s greatest weapon was their composure. Without it, they were powerless. *I need to calm down...but how?* Kite and Ryucco retreated to the corner of the room and started whispering to each other. *Sorry guys, but I can still hear you loud and clear.*

“This isn’t good, Veight’s totally lost his cool.”

“You think he’s fallen for that human woman?”

“What else could it be? Damn, I don’t even want to think about what might happen if Veight gets serious...”

“Shit. We gotta fix this quickly before he blows his top. Lacy’s using illusion magic to buy time, but it won’t work for long.”

I can’t believe I’m making everyone worry about me like this. I don’t deserve to be a vice-commander. I have to calm down. But how? My thoughts kept running around in circles.

Let’s just focus on the things I need to do right now, and worry about everything else later. My biggest priority was fulfilling Airia’s duties as viceroy in her stead. At the moment, that meant getting the people of Ryunheit to safety.

I turned to a nearby guard and ordered, “Have everyone in the city’s old district evacuate. The sewers flow southward, so have the people in the

southern section of the new district leave as well. Make sure absolutely no one is left behind.”

“Yes, sir!” He saluted and ran off.

A few seconds later, Melaine returned. She was dressed in formal clothes, which was a rarity for her.

“Veight, the goblet hasn’t sent any of its tendrils out yet. It’s probably being cautious since each one takes a lot of mana to maintain.”

“Well that’s a relief.”

“Plus, Parker took all the spirits in the area with him to attack the Boltz Mines, so there’s pretty much none left in Ryunheit for it to use its necromancy on. We’re safe for now.” Melaine’s expression softened a little. “So please stop making that face.”

“What kind of face am I making?”

I was still in my werewolf form so I was surprised she could even read my expression.

“You don’t have to worry so much. I have everything under control.” She gave me a reassuring smile and patted her chest. “The goblet’s not so far underground that my magic can’t reach it. If it tries anything, I’ll be able to stop it. I won’t let it lay a hand on the city’s people.”

When Master’s oldest disciple said that it was hard not to feel a little comforted. Right now, Lacy was using her illusions to deceive the goblet and keep Airia from finding it. My werewolves were also keeping an eye on every corner of the city. When I first conquered Ryunheit, I’d had the canines fix up the sewage system, so I had an up-to-date map of the tunnels that ran underneath. Plus, Kite knew exactly where the goblet was, and was keeping an eye on it at all times. On the off chance it did try something, Melaine would be able to counter it immediately.

The problem was, I still didn’t know how I was going to save Airia. Master had once told me that forcibly expelling an entity from someone else’s mind could cause permanent damage to the host’s personality and memories. She’d likened it to how carelessly ripping an arrow out of someone’s shoulder only

made the wound worse. Unfortunately, we had no mind control specialists here.

“Veight. Hey Veight, you listening to me?” Ryucco’s voice interrupted my musings. He was tugging at my pant leg again, his round eyes staring up at me. “Man, you’re really worried about Airia, huh?”

“Of course I am. She’s a councilor, and the demon army’s most important human ally.”

“Please, as if that’s what’s important here.” Ryucco shook his head. “If Airia was just some common citizen who had nothing to do with the demon army, would you abandon her?”

“Absolutely not!”

I was trying to remain as calm as possible, but I couldn’t keep the vehemence out of my voice. Ryucco yelped and hopped back. Werewolves were one of the lagomorphs’ natural predators, so my yelling had probably awoken some instinctive fear within him. However, Ryucco didn’t let go of my pants even as he backed up.

“D-Don’t scare me like that, goddammit! I know you’re not a scary guy, but you look scary as shit when you’re like that!”

“Sorry, I’ll try to be more careful.”

“G-Good. Anyway... This is kinda hard for me to say, but...” He hesitated for a few seconds, then let out a small sigh. Resolved, he jumped up onto a nearby chair and looked me in the eyes. “Listen up, and listen good. What I’m about to tell you goes against everything an artificer stands for.”

“O-Okay?”

I sat down across from Ryucco and gave him my full attention.

“If that blasted goblet really is a Hero-making machine with the ability to think for itself, then it won’t give up until it achieves its goal. It was obviously made to keep functioning even after its creator died.”

“That certainly sounds like a problem.”

“Yeah. The only way to fix this is to smash the thing. But if we smash it right

now, Airia might be affected too. Which is why..." Ryucco frowned and started stamping the ground with his foot. "If getting Airia back is that important to you, then we've gotta take a risk. We need to let that stupid goblet finish its job and turn Airia into a Hero."

"Wait, what!?"

"Shut up and listen, I'm not done yet. If it succeeds in making Airia a Hero, she'll be free. With the amount of power she'll have, it won't be able to control her mind, even if it wants to. It'd be like trying to lasso a rampaging bull with a silk string."

Ryucco started stamping the ground even harder. It was obvious just saying this was stressing him out.

"Right now, the goblet's got no way of getting the mana to make Airia a Hero, so it's gonna try and find some other method. It's got enough intelligence to think for itself, after all."

"I understand what you're getting at, but isn't this too dangerous!?"

"I know, goddammit! Normally, I wouldn't ever suggest something like this! No sane artificer would! But you know, I..." Ryucco averted his gaze and muttered, "I can't stand seeing you look so sad."

"Ryucco..."

He's really worried about me, isn't he?

Ryucco quietly added, "Since that shitty goblet has necromancy powers, any method it can think of to gather mana will probably involve killing people. Which is why we need to find a huge stockpile of mana and shove it in its face."

"A huge stockpile of mana... Wait, are you suggesting we use..."

Ason's Legendary Treasure was currently in Ryunheit. Ryucco scratched his head and gave me a mischievous grin. "Yeah, I am. Why don't we let the thing meet its friend? Whaddaya think—it's an insane idea, right?"

"Oh, it's insane alright. We'll be going against the will of the council and breaking the treaty we signed with Wa. This is gonna be a huge diplomatic issue."

Fumino and the Heavenwatchers were in charge of keeping Ason's Legendary Treasure safe. Meaning, we'd have to go through them to steal it. What we were about to do was a capital offense, so I couldn't ask anyone else to do it in my stead.

Ryucco's expression grew serious, and he asked, "So whaddaya say? You in?"

I still had my reservations, but in my heart, I'd already made up my mind. I gathered my resolve and replied, "Let's do this. It's the perfect plan for a villain like me."

"Now that's more like it, Veight."

Ryucco smiled happily, and I bowed my head to him. "Sorry, I know that must have been hard for you to say."

"Yeah, you better be grateful. Once all this is over, cut some apples for me, okay?"

"Sure. You like it when I cut them in the shape of bunnies, right?"

I smiled back at him, opened the window, and jumped out.

I turned back into my human form and hurried over to a stone building in the old district. On paper, this was a warehouse that had nothing to do with the Commonwealth Council, but it was actually a vault where Ason's Legendary Treasure was stored. As expected, Fumino and the other Heavenwatchers came out as I drew close. They weren't Meraldian, so they weren't required to listen to our evacuation order.

"Lord Veight, what brings you here in the midst of a crisis?"

Fumino was smiling gently, like always. But I knew she was a skilled ninja who used her precognitive powers and sharp wires to bury anyone who opposed the Chrysanthemum Court. Though I couldn't see them, I had no doubt she'd set up wires all around already. The three Heavenwatchers standing behind her all looked like simple Meraldian citizens, but I could tell they were hiding weapons in their canes, or underneath their clothes. I decided being blunt would be best here.

“I need to use Ason’s Legendary Treasure.”

“But Lord Veight, the treaty stipulates that...” Fumino didn’t look surprised, but she seemed more confused than hostile. “Is there truly no other way?”

It was obvious from her tone that she wanted me to rethink my decision. Nothing good would come from me and the Heavenwatchers fighting here. Still, I’d already made my decision.

“I’m sorry, Lady Fumino. But right now I’m just a common criminal. I’m afraid I don’t have time to justify my actions.”

The moment I said that, I could smell a mixture of fear and hostility come from the Heavenwatchers behind her. *Guess I have to fight.* While the Heavenwatchers were all highly trained fighters, they were still human. There was no way four of them would be able to overpower a werewolf. Just then, Fumino smiled sadly.

“We’re not foolish enough to believe we could subdue you in a fight, Lord Veight. Ninjas aren’t knights; we’re not interested in rushing headlong to our deaths.”

Fumino made a quick hand sign, and her three subordinates vanished into the shadows. Their scents started to fade, so they must have retreated. It appeared I wouldn’t have to fight, at least. *Actually, wait. They’re ninjas, so maybe they’re just looking to ambush me.* However, Fumino showed no signs of attacking, and instead bowed.

“Since I have no hope of beating you, I will let you pass without a struggle. However, will you at least allow me to report what happened to my superiors?”

“Of course. Let them know that I intend to make amends for breaking the treaty as well.”

I was the one in the wrong here, after all. I just hoped I’d get to keep my post long enough to do something to make up for it. For some reason, Fumino smiled happily at that.

“In that case, let’s just say that you owe me a favor, Lord Veight.”

With that, Fumino vanished into the shadows as well. Her scent faded away a

few seconds later. *Why do I get the feeling that she was never planning on fighting to begin with? She only came out to put me in her debt.* The fact that I owed her a personal favor meant that my debt wouldn't go away even if I was dismissed from my post. *Well, it's no big deal.* If she needed my help later, I'd give it. But right now, I needed to save Airia.

Ason's Legendary Treasure was kept in a small room with thick stone walls and a heavy iron door. Knowing Fumino she could have booby-trapped the whole room, but if her goal was to put me in her debt then she had no reason to interfere with me.

I gingerly picked up the goblet lying in the center of the room. The amount of mana stored within this thing was insane. Right now, it was safely compressed, but if it was unleashed without the proper precautions, it could blow up an entire city. *Speaking of which, how exactly am I supposed to transfer the mana in here to Airia?* Airia wasn't a mage, and her body was currently under the enemy's control. I doubted just handing Ason's Legendary Treasure to her would be enough.

I guess there's only one way. I would need to carry the mana inside me for a bit. Theoretically, the ability I had inherited from Master would allow me to absorb all the mana in the goblet. However, this thing had been absorbing mana from the land for centuries. Taking all of it inside my body would be like trying to drink an ocean. A shiver of fear ran down my spine. Still, there was no other way. And I didn't have time to deliberate.

"Let's do this."

I lifted the dully glinting goblet to my mouth and swallowed all the mana it contained in one gulp. A second later, my vision grew blurry.

"Guh!"

My heart began to race. My palms were sweaty. My knees grew weak, and my arms felt heavy. Suddenly, a splitting migraine started coming on. This was the first time since being reborn as a werewolf that I'd felt so ill. Unable to stay on my feet, I dropped to all fours. The scariest thing was I didn't even feel my legs give out underneath me. My breath came in short gasps, and cold sweat poured down my back. As my consciousness grew dim, I began to wonder if I

was dying.

Like hell I'm dying here. I've got a job to do! I remembered one of the lessons Master had given me right after I'd become her disciple.

"You store mana with your body, manipulate it with your mind, and release it with your mouth."

"I'm not sure that metaphor makes sense, Master..."

"Your mana is a part of your flesh and blood, but it is your imagination that moves it. The incantations you speak are what help activate it."

"That makes a bit more sense."

"It is impossible to understand with just an explanation, you must feel this truth for yourself."

There was no problem with my body. A werewolf's body was built to withstand any amount of mana. *As for my mind...I need to get my imagination working.* In fistfights, imagining that your punches were coming out faster actually increased the speed of your fists, and holding the mental image of gripping the ground with the toes of your pivot foot made your kicks more solid. Magic worked the same way. The flow of mana was heavily dependent on how you imagined it. I needed to visualize the mana running through me like a vortex. The people of this world had only seen natural vortexes, like whirlpools or swirling clouds. But in my previous life, I'd seen far more abstract vortexes rendered via CG. I could use those as a base.

The moment I imagined the mana within me like a swirling vortex of light, the pain began to fade. The violent torrent of mana surging within my body became a gentle spiral, and was gradually absorbed into my flesh. My extremities tingled a little as the vast quantity of mana was integrated with my body.

My voice was the last thing I needed to use. Fortunately, I had a lot of experience from athletic meets back in school. All I had to do was give a spirited yell. I sucked in a deep breath, and roared with all my might. To my surprise, the roar leveled the building. By the time the sound faded away, nothing but rubble remained. I dug my way out of the rubble and saw that everything around me had been destroyed as well. Everyone should have evacuated so there probably

weren't any casualties, but this was some serious damage.

"What the heck... Did I do all this?"

I'd just shouted to help control the mana swirling through me, but it appeared I'd let loose a full-power Soul Shaker by accident. I'd sucked Ason's Legendary Treasure completely dry, too. Not only had I taken all the mana out of it, but I'd even sucked out the mana powering its magic circuit, rendering the artifact inoperable. Somehow I'd grabbed the frame so hard that the metal was warped beyond recognition. This was the second ancient artifact I'd ruined, with the first being the Werewolf Killer. Future mages would probably remember me as a barbaric buffoon who'd destroyed numerous priceless treasures.

Regardless, my plan had worked. I was now host to the vast amount of mana the goblet had stored. If the amount I normally possessed was equal to one Veight, then right now I had tens of thousands of Veights. I could use as many spells as I wanted without exhausting my mana supply, and each of my offensive spells would possess the power to alter the local geography.

So this is the realm Heroes and Demon Lords live in. This kind of power can change the world. Of course, if I kept all this mana, I wouldn't be able to save Airia. I needed to give it to her. I could worry about what potential consequences arose from turning her into a Hero after she was freed from the goblet's clutches. Kite and the other werewolves were still tracking Airia, and according to them, she had yet to resurface. It was time to hunt her down.

I ran through the deserted streets of the old district, my body feeling surprisingly light. Though I was trying to just run at my usual pace, each time I kicked off the ground, the world passed by in a blur. Every time I landed, I left deep cracks in the cobblestones, too. Also, glass windows shattered when I passed by them.

I knew this was an emergency, but every time I broke something, I couldn't help thinking about who I'd need to contact for repairs, and how much it would cost me. *Just how obsessed with paperwork am I?* If I was already like this, I probably wasn't cut out to be a Hero or a Demon Lord. But even if this power didn't suit me, right now I needed it to go save Airia. Besides, this district was empty so even if I reduced it to rubble, no one would die. *As for how I'll*

reimburse all the citizens... I'll worry about that later.

After reaching the point where Airia's trail had disappeared, I went into the sewers and started dashing through the tunnels. The goblet was skilled at stealth, but it couldn't hide Airia. In the pitch-black sewers, the lingering scent of Airia's perfume was like a glowing thread leading the way.

I enhanced my senses as much as possible and chased after her. By using magic to enhance my already heightened werewolf senses, I could see perfectly clearly even in the darkness. It was strange, being able to see everything like it was broad daylight. Unfortunately, a bunch of other smells got mixed in with Airia's as I advanced through the sewers. This particular tunnel wasn't connected to the waste drainage lines, so it wasn't the unpleasant smell of garbage or excrement. Still, even the smell of laundry water was enough to get in my way. It had the stench of humans on it, which made it harder to tell Airia's scent apart. Thankfully, Airia's perfume was easy to pinpoint among the jumble of smells.

After a few minutes of running, the scent grew stronger. Finally, I got close enough to see her. Airia was sitting in a corner of one of the tunnels. I didn't know where she'd gotten it, but she had a small lamp in one hand. I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw that she was still alive and well. The problem was, she had Draulight's Legacy gripped tightly in her other hand.

"Are you here to get in my way again, werewolf?"

Airia slowly got to her feet. Her voice was unbelievably cold. It was obvious the goblet was speaking through her. I smiled thinly at the goblet, doing my best to keep my anger under control.

"You're the one getting in my way. Surrender peacefully, or an evil werewolf will gobble you up."

The goblet and I started shaping our mana at the same time. A second later, we unleashed our spells at each other.

While I physically fought with Airia, I was also forced to fight a mage battle with the goblet itself.

“Haaaah!”

Airia drew her sword and lunged at my throat. She moved swiftly, but was limited by her human body. I easily parried the blade with my claws, but then had to contend with the goblet sending a powerful necromancy curse at me. I’d die instantly if it hit. The goblet didn’t speak any incantations or make any gestures before casting, making it impossible to predict when it would cast. I could read the flow of its mana, but not when that flow would be unleashed. However, I had a nigh-limitless supply of mana at my disposal right now. The goblet fired multiple forbidden instant-death spells at me, but none of them had any effect. Each of them shaved off a small chunk of my mana, but only about 3-4 Veights’ worth. Barely a drop in the bucket compared to how much I had.

“Hah!”

Airia said nothing as we fought. Naturally, she let out brief grunts here and there, but she spoke no words. The goblet couldn’t hurt me using Airia, because her body wasn’t strong enough. However, it *could* keep me at bay. *This is getting tricky. How am I gonna get all this mana to Airia?*



She wasn't a mage, so she wouldn't be able to process such a huge quantity all at once. That being said, if I handed it to her little by little, she'd never have enough to be a Hero. The goblet would just use whatever I gave her to attack me. Besides, I didn't have the time to do this slowly. That only left the extremely primitive method of oral transfer. Since I primarily used strengthening magic, I was a master of transferring various forms of power to others. That included mana, of course.

On a fundamental level, mana was no different from electricity or heat. Direct contact was the most efficient way to transfer it from one object to another.
Time to go on the offensive.

I swiftly circled around behind Airia. The moment she lost sight of me, I leaped into the air. Humans always watched out for threats next to and below them, but never for threats from above. This was something I'd learned living in a forest. As expected, Airia whirled around and swung at the empty air behind her. It seemed the goblet had to use Airia's senses when it was controlling her, which made things a lot easier for me. I landed softly behind Airia, catching her by surprise.

"Wha!?"

That outburst sounded like it came from the real Airia. But even if the goblet's control was wavering, I couldn't let my guard down. I grabbed Airia from behind, the same way my werewolf ancestors had grabbed their prey.

"It's over."

I pinned her against a wall and unleashed all of my mana.

But a second later, something strange happened to my vision. An illusion seemed to be spreading out before me. For a moment, I thought this was another one of the goblet's attacks, but that didn't seem right. After all, Airia had stopped moving as well.

Before I knew it, I was standing in an unfamiliar garden. The garden itself looked like a historical ruin, but there were still beautiful flowers blooming within it. The soft breeze that blew past carried no scent, which told me that

this scene couldn't be reality. In the distance, I could see a building. It looked quite similar to the viceroy's manor in Ryunheit. *I think I know what's going on here.*

A long time ago, Master had taught me about a branch of magic known as "spirit magic." It allowed the user to visualize people's minds as houses. Those houses were protected by a fence and gate, and had a garden out in front. The houses themselves were complicated, labyrinthine structures with multiple hallways and rooms. At the very core of each house was a secret room which represented all the deepest desires and beliefs a person held. Since I'd come here the moment I'd connected my mana with hers, my guess was this was Airia's mind palace. If she allowed me to enter her house, it would be the same as opening her heart to me. The goblet had basically forced its way in with magic like a common burglar and was using what it had learned to control her.

Right now I was in Airia's garden, which meant she was showing me as much as she would an acquaintance. There was nothing fundamental to her character left out in the garden. In order to see the true Airia, I would need to go deeper inside her house.

I followed the winding path nearby. I couldn't think of any other way to break this connection than by talking with Airia, and I wanted to know more about her anyway. My sense of hearing, smell, and touch told me that in the real world, the two of us still weren't moving. Draulight's Legacy seemed inert as well, so I didn't have to worry about any surprise attacks for the moment. I could worry about destroying it after I saved Airia.

For now, I walked through the warm sunlit field and approached the house's front door. *Airia's front garden is really well-kept.* The water in the pond was crystal clear, and the few trees had been carefully pruned. There was nothing in particular that stood out, but taken as a whole it was a very relaxing garden. It reminded me of how Airia usually acted.

The house itself was a rather sturdy, elegant building. As I said before, it looked quite similar to the viceroy's manor in Ryunheit. If Airia had closed her heart to me, the front door would be locked. But when I approached, the heavy oaken door swung open of its own volition. As far as I could tell, there was no

one nearby. *I guess this means I'm welcome?* This was my first time visiting someone else's mind palace, so I didn't really know what the proper manners here were.

"Thanks for having me..." I muttered quietly, bowing my head as I stepped into the entryway. The moment I stepped inside, the door slammed shut behind me. "Huh!? What the!?"

Now the door was locked. It wouldn't open no matter how hard I pushed or pulled. *What is this, a haunted house?* A werewolf's strength was meaningless in the mindscape, so if the door didn't want to open, I wouldn't be able to force it. *Well, whatever. Let's just explore for a bit first.*

There were multiple hallways branching out from the foyer, with countless doors in each corridor. It was a very different layout from the manor in Ryunheit, and it was way bigger than it looked from the outside. Plus, unlike a normal house, there were a bunch of mismatched objects scattered around. For example, hanging from the wall of one hallway was Airia's favorite sabre. However, it looked brand new, and the hilt had a slightly different design than the one I was used to. She'd told me the sabre she carried was a memento of her father, so this was probably the one he'd used. A man's formal uniform was hanging next to it, so I suspected my hunch was correct. Airia's mom had died of puerperal fever shortly after giving birth, so there were no mementos of her in this mansion. In this world, it was depressingly common for women to die during or shortly after childbirth.

I examined the articles hanging from the walls or lying on the floor as I advanced down a random hallway. All of the doors within the mansion were unlocked, so I could peek into any one I wanted. Most of them seemed to house women's clothing like skirts and one-pieces, all of which were scattered about, and none of them were neatly folded or hung up. There were also a lot of riding and fencing outfits. Most looked pretty similar to the tracksuits we had back on earth. These, too, were scattered about haphazardly. It seemed Airia had been quite a rowdy tomboy in her youth. *I wonder where Airia's secret room is...*

I systematically went down the different hallways, checking each door I passed. One room looked to be a study room. It lacked the toys and miscellaneous objects the other rooms had. Judging by the covers of the books

lying on the desk, this was where she'd learned proper manners. *But even these books are scattered about. Did you hate cleaning or something?*

The relaxed atmosphere vanished the moment I climbed the stairs to the second floor. Lying halfway up the stairs was a black mourning dress—the kind a viceroy would wear. *This must be a memory of when she lost her father.* The second floor hallway was far more dilapidated than the first, and there were no windows. The ceiling was much lower as well, making the hallway feel claustrophobic.

Inside the first room I opened, I spotted the men's uniform Airia normally wore to work. *So she only started wearing that after her dad died.* Spread throughout the rooms and the hallway were a number of documents all bearing the Senate's seal. All of them were scathing indictments of Airia. "How dare you act so impetuous when you're just a woman." "She's just a country bumpkin from the south!" "Why don't you go back to squeezing money out of people, you dirty merchant!" It seemed this was what the Senators used to say about her. *No wonder she switched over to the demons' side so easily.* But Airia had never once badmouthed the Senators in front of me. She was the kind of person who'd never insult someone behind their back, no matter how evil they were. I respected her even more than ever now that I knew just how bad she'd had it. At the same time, I was furious with the old Senate. If I'd known they were this horrible, I would have slaughtered them all myself.

The hallway on the second floor was quite long. Airia had only been a viceroy for two years when I first met her, but with how this hallway kept going, those two years must have felt like an eternity to her. Eventually, the hallway made a sharp turn, and when I rounded the corridor, the bleak atmosphere vanished. The first thing that caught my eye was a shattered window; beyond it, I could see the streets of Ryunheit.

Is this her memory of the time I broke in through her window? The Senate's letters were still scattered around the floor, but now they'd all been ripped to shreds by a werewolf's claws. After walking for a minute or so down the corridor, the letters disappeared entirely. The demon army's occupation of

Ryunheit had clearly been a turning point in Airia's life. The rooms connected to the hallway now had a bunch of strange objects lying in them too.

For example, a massive Thuvan ballista occupied one room. *Wait, isn't this the same ballista I brought back as a souvenir for Airia?* There was a pink ribbon tied to the end for some reason. *I definitely didn't put that on.* The book on cavalry tactics I bought for Airia some time back was lying on a silk cushion. There were plenty of other mismatched objects lying around. Hanging on the wall were the three shirts I'd bought at the marketplace. The first time I wore one of them, Airia had looked like she was trying her hardest not to laugh. I remember Lacy and Kite telling me never to wear that shirt again.

"What's this?"

In another room, I found a number of small Japanese-style bowls sitting on the table in the center. Fresh shrimp tails filled one of the bowls. *Is this her memory of the time we went out to eat in Wa?* Another bowl contained tofu. Next to the table was a kimono rack, and the kimono Airia had worn in Wa was hanging from it.

This corridor was quite long as well. After what felt like ages of walking, I finally reached the end, and there I found a closed door. Every other room I'd encountered had been open, so this was new. This was likely the room that contained Airia's deepest secrets. I had no idea what proper etiquette in a mind palace was, so I decided to knock first.

"Airia, it's me, Veight. Can I come in?"

There was no reply, but if Airia didn't want me to see this room, it would be locked. I grabbed the handle and pushed. The door swung open surprisingly easily.

The room inside...wasn't exactly a room. On the other side of the door was an open balcony. A pleasant breeze wafted past me, and I could see birds soaring in the distance. Though the balcony had no roof, it had all the furniture a normal room would, like sofas and a bed. Normally that'd be strange, but this was the mindscape, so all bets were off. Airia was here, standing in front of a small table. She was absentmindedly gazing at the scenery, and it felt like she

might vanish at any second.

“Airia!” I shouted. That seemed to get her attention, and she turned back to me in surprise.

“Veight!?”

As I ran over to her, I realized something was wrong. Airia’s wrists were shackled; the silver manacles gleaming dully in the dim light. The chains ran across the table, linking her with Draulight’s Legacy.



Is that the spirit magic suppressing Airia's will? I reflexively dropped into a battle stance, but I couldn't transform. *Come to think of it, my real body's still transformed and keeping Airia pinned, isn't it?* This world was an illusion created with spirit magic. The silver chains binding Airia were just an abstract representation, not physical objects that I could break.

"I've come to save you, Airia."

At that, Airia smiled.

"It really is you, Veight!"

But then a second later, her expression grew pained.

"I'm sorry... If I hadn't been so careless, this wouldn't—"

"It's not your fault. The goblet was lying in wait until it found someone that met its conditions, and you happened to fit the bill."

Airia had done nothing wrong, and this goblet had just come in and messed up her life. *How dare it make her feel bad on top of everything else! I don't care if you're some priceless artifact from a forgotten age! I'm gonna turn you into scrap metal!* I kept my eye on the goblet to make sure it didn't try anything, but for the moment it seemed to be docile. For some odd reason, there were a number of chickens around the goblet. They were pecking at the goblet's sides with their beaks.

"What are they doing?"

Airia chuckled and replied, "The goblet has been using magic constantly since escaping underground, and every time it casts a spell, another chicken appears."

What connection do these chickens have with its necromancy? Wait, are these the spirits of animals that were slaughtered for meat? Don't bring those kinds of things into Airia's mind palace, goddammit! Of course—like everything else in this world—these chickens were illusory. They didn't make any noise, and they continued repeating the same actions over and over. The goblet hadn't brought real spirits into this house.

I walked over to the goblet and looked down at it. "You wanna make a Hero,

don't you?"

"It wants to do what?" Airia asked, puzzled.

I doubted Draulight's Legacy had given her an explanation when it had taken over her, so she was still in the dark about what was going on. Though the goblet said nothing, the chickens pecking its sides all turned to me simultaneously. Their expressionless eyes studied me. I tried visualizing my own mana to see if I could manifest it in this world. A second later, a jewel-encrusted diadem formed in my hand. It emitted a soft light that immediately brightened up the area. The chickens that had been standing protectively around the goblet began to transform. Their white feathers turned a purplish-black as they spread their wings menacingly, and their necks began to elongate. *They look like monsters now.* The chicken-monsters stared at the diadem in my hand. They tried to approach it, but every time they got close, an unseen force pushed them back.

"I'm not giving this to you, so keep your dirty paws off it."

I had no doubt the goblet would do something evil with this mana if I gave it up to it. I turned to Airia and smiled at her.

"The mana contained in Ason's Legendary Treasure belongs to me now."

"Isn't that going against the treaty we signed with Wa!?"

"I know. But Draulight's Legacy won't stop until it's made a Hero out of someone. This is the only way to destroy it and keep you safe." I proffered the diadem to her. "This is more than enough mana to turn you into a Hero. If you take it, you'll easily be able to break free from the goblet's mind control."

"Me, a Hero? But I'm not sure I..." Airia hesitated.

I knew how she felt. The Hero who appeared before had been our enemy. To her, Heroes were a symbol of fear. After thinking about it for a few seconds, I offered an alternative, "If you don't want to be a Hero, then how about becoming a Demon Lord?"

"A Demon Lord, you say? I suppose that's a more appealing prospect, but..."

"According to Master's research, there's no difference between Heroes and

Demon Lords. They're both terms for people who have abnormally large mana reserves. It's just that humans started calling the people who helped them Heroes, and the ones who opposed them Demon Lords."

Because all demon "Heroes" ended up fighting against humans, they were, without exception, branded Demon Lords. The people who rose up to oppose them were all Heroes. The two superpowers inevitably ended up clashing, canceling each other out, and leaving nothing behind. Occasionally one would survive the confrontation, but in such an injured state that they could no longer be considered superhuman. That was why I had been able to beat Arshes.

"Both Draulight's Legacy and Ason's Legendary Treasure are tools for creating Heroes. The old dynasty tried to mass-produce them for war. In retrospect it was a pretty dumb idea, since every time a Hero's made, a Demon Lord is born on the opposite side."

Worry suddenly colored Airia's expression. "Does that mean...if I become a Demon Lord, another Hero will appear?"

"Assuming Master's theory is correct, yeah. Though it's not like they'll show up right away. We'll have time to prepare."

Friedensrichter had been around for decades, but Arshes only showed up to confront the old Demon Lord a little over a year ago. I don't know if we'd get decades as well, but even a year or two would be enough time for Master and her disciples to figure out some way to handle this new Hero.

In an attempt to cheer Airia up, I joked, "There's a lot of perks to being a Demon Lord, you know. They all get highly skilled vice-commanders, for one."

Airia looked up at me and said without hesitation, "Okay, I'll become a Demon Lord."

"Wait, what!?"

Smiling, Airia said, "No matter what kind of horrible monster I turn into or what dangers I face, I know I'll have nothing to worry about if I have my vice-commander by my side."

"You *are* referring to me here, right?"

“Yes, of course.”

I’ve never seen her smile like that before. The dark clouds that had been hanging above the balcony vanished, and bright sunlight rained down from the clear blue sky. *Does the weather symbolize her feelings? Guess I’ve gotta follow through with this then.* I gathered my resolve and nodded to Airia.

“No matter what happens, I will always be by your side. Until death do us part.”

“Thank you...”

Still bound by the chains, Airia knelt in front of me. I stepped forward to place the diadem on her forehead, but just before I could, she cocked her head and asked, “By the way, Veight, what exactly is that scenery behind you?”

“Hm?”

Turning around, I realized the hallway I’d come through was no longer there. *Was the view behind me always like this?* Instead, a big black stone wall behind me. It formed part of a room, and the room’s other walls were covered in large bookshelves. The dreary wall had a single window situated high up, with iron bars blocking it. With every step I took towards Airia, more of the balcony’s white marble floor was replaced with the black stone that made up the wall behind me. The bookshelves expanded as well, filling the space I had just vacated. It was a strange sight, but that gave me a clue as to what I was looking at.

“I’m not sure, but I think this might be the view of my heart.”

Though the bookshelves were polished and free of dust, the books looked worn with use. There were books on magic, as well as children’s picture books. There was even educational manga meant for elementary schoolers, and textbooks I’d used in high school. I spotted a few English dictionaries and an intro to psychology book as well.

Naturally, I recognized the titles of each and every book. A good half of them were from my past life. This was undoubtedly my own mindscape. Compared to Airia’s stylish, lively manor, I felt like my giant room of books was barren and gloomy, especially considering the window had iron bars on it.

“Everything behind me is a representation of my thoughts and feelings, and everything behind you is a representation of yours. Right now we are almost literally having a heart-to-heart.”

“I see...so this is what your heart looks like... It feels tranquil, austere, and unfathomable.”

I'm glad you don't think it's boring, but please don't stare too much. Every guy's got a few books they're too embarrassed to show anyone. After a few seconds, Airia looked up at the window in my room.

“What's that strange object flying in the sky? It looks like a bird, but it seems...mechanical?”

I looked out the window. Outside, I could see my hometown's commercial district. *This is pretty close to where I worked.* Flying high overhead was a passenger jet.

“Oh, that's a plane.”

“What's a plane?”

“It'll take a long time to explain, so...”

If I told her what a plane was, I'd have to explain that I reincarnated as well. Until now, I hadn't told a soul that I remembered my past life. Mostly because there was no need to. I thought I would live out the rest of my life never telling anyone. But Airia seemed so interested in my past that I ended up blurting out, “It's a machine that I enjoyed looking at when I was a kid. I'll tell you the whole story after we take care of this goblet problem.”

“Will you really?”

“Yeah, I promise.”

Smiling, Airia dipped her head. “Very well. Then I suppose I'll have to accept this mana.”

“Ready?”

I just made another crazy promise, didn't I... I placed the sparkling diadem on Airia's forehead. The moment I did, a burst of light filled the balcony, blinding me.

I quickly returned to my senses. *I'm back in the sewer.* My body was transformed again, and I was pinning Airia to the ground. She seemed to have lost consciousness. Since I'd transferred most of my mana over to her, my own mana pool was back to normal. Even though I'd just gone back to normal, my body felt heavy. Giving up all that mana at once probably hadn't been the smartest of ideas.

Just then, I noticed something. There were no light sources in this sewer, but my surroundings were bright. Moreover, the air smelled clean. Looking up, I realized there was a huge hole in the ceiling. *What the heck?* It was then that I finally noticed a huge pillar of mana was rising up from Airia, which seemed to be what had blown a hole into the ceiling. It had taken me longer than usual to notice because I was still hugging Airia. Right now she was like a mana geyser.

I'm surprised her mana isn't hurting me. Anyway, why is she emitting so much? The transfer hadn't been perfect so it made sense for there to be some leakage, but this was way too much. There was an obscene amount of mana swirling around Airia right now. If that mana combusted, the entire tunnel would collapse. I hugged her tight and prepared to jump out of the sewers. The last thing I wanted was for us to get buried alive because an accident happened. To my surprise, Draulight's Legacy was sitting a few feet away from me. *Guess I should take care of this guy before leaving.*

"Can you talk?" I asked the goblet. After a few seconds, I heard a faint voice.

"In the current situation, yes."

It had no vocal cords, but it was speaking by vibrating the surrounding mana. This method probably only worked when the density of mana was as thick as it was now. I grinned at the motionless goblet.

"Can you do anything right now?"

"Negative. The surrounding mana is blocking his necromancy."

"His? Who is this guy?"

"He is he."

That's not an answer. Either way, it seemed Airia had complete control of this area. She might not have intended for this, but her mana was dominating the surroundings. *Now then, what to do with this goblet?* Being a tool, the only way to stop it was to destroy it, or find its off switch.

"Tell me how to deactivate you."

"That is impossible. He was designed to never stop once activated."

Who is this guy you keep referring to?

"What's *his* name, then?"

"His name has been concealed from all. Even he does not know. But he is the magician who created me."

Something about the way the goblet kept saying "he" bugged me. *That reminds me, Master said people skilled enough to make artifacts this powerful often imprint their egos onto their magnum opuses. Maybe the guy who made this purposely forgot his own name so no one could find it out from the goblet?*

As I was thinking, Draulight's Legacy asked, "Why is the completed subject not destroying the region? The power transfer has been completed. Phase two should have begun. This requires further investigation."

"Idiot," I spat. My anger was directed not towards the goblet, but the man who'd made it. "Not everyone who obtains power gets corrupted by it. You just selectively picked the kinds of people who would."

Those who held deep-seated grudges against society or hated their environment were the kinds of people who'd start destroying things indiscriminately if they got their hands on godlike power. Had I obtained the powers of a Hero in my past life, I might have done some pretty horrible things too. But Airia was better than that. She was patient, humble, and kind. That was why I'd been willing to entrust her with this kind of power.

A complex magical crest started flickering on the goblet's rim. *So this is what this thing's programming looks like.*

"Recalculating procedures... Applying exception 4-2..."

Looks like it's plotting something again. I already couldn't forgive this goblet

for what it had done, but this proved it was still dangerous too. I needed to destroy it.

“Werewolf... If I take control of you, I may be able to bring about a different result. Accept him as your master... Obtain ultimate power, and become superhuman...”

The goblet sent out tendrils of mind-control magic. However, Airia’s mana destroyed them before they could even get close to me.

“Cut the crap. You’re in the presence of a Demon Lord. You’re powerless as long as Airia’s here.”

All of Ryunheit was under the protection of Airia’s mana. As long as she kept emitting mana like this, no one could cast a spell she didn’t approve of. This ancient goblet couldn’t do a thing.

“Recalculating... Recalibrating...”

I smiled triumphantly at the goblet, which still hadn’t given up. “There’s nothing to recalculate. I turned Airia into a Demon Lord, so you can’t control her. And I’m not interested in power myself, so there’s no point in trying to cut a deal with me. There’s no one left to fight, anyway.”

The magic circle began flickering even faster. It kind of looked like it was blinking rapidly.

“What...what in the world are you? Your behavioral patterns do not fall under those of a normal werewolf, or even a normal demon.”

Obviously not. But I’m not gonna tell you my secrets.

“I’m just a vice-commander,” I replied as I wiped my hand across the magic circle.

After turning the ancient artifact into a powerless antique, I sighed. “What kind of mage goes around destroying magical artifacts?”

I hated how my own inexperience led to less-than-ideal outcomes. But right now, rescuing Airia was more important than wallowing in regret. I adjusted my grip around her and leapt out of the hole in the ceiling. To my surprise, it was

nighttime. I must have spent a long time in Airia's mind palace.

She was still spreading her mana across all of Ryunheit. Motes of it fell from the sky like snowflakes. Touching one healed a little of my exhaustion and put me in a relaxed mood. *I've never seen a magical phenomenon like this one.*

"Hm?"

Just then, I noticed that Airia's eyes were open. *When did she regain consciousness?* She closed her eyes again the moment she noticed my gaze, but I wasn't fooled.

"Airia, if you're awake, there's something I want to ask you."

"O-Okay."

Airia reluctantly opened her eyes. I looked directly into them, and she blushed and looked away. Judging by her scent, she was no longer under the goblet's mind control. I let her down, and she glanced around.

"Did I do all of this?"

"I think so. You're still gushing mana, and no one else has enough to create a phenomenon like this."

If you were to get your hands on godlike powers, how would you use them? Everyone had a different answer to that question. The old Demon Lord, Friedensrichter, had used it to protect other demons. He'd started a war with humans, but only to secure a home for his kind. The Hero Arshes had been overcome with grief and rage after losing someone he loved, and dedicated his strength to defeating the Demon Lord. I'd used the power I gained to save Airia. And now she would most likely use that power to protect Ryunheit.

I smiled at her and said, "I take it this is how you want to use your power now that you're a Demon Lord?"

Airia thought about it for a few seconds, then replied, "Yes, I think it is. The power of a Demon Lord is too much for me. Since I don't need it, I may as well use it for Ryunheit."

"I see."

I looked up at the night sky. The tiny motes of mana looked like stars falling to

the ground. The whole city was enveloped in a warm, gentle light. It was a spectacular sight.

“It’s beautiful,” I mused.

“Indeed. It’s strange to think that I’m the source of this wondrous sight.”

Airia looked up with a dazed expression and I suddenly felt the urge to tease her.

“It’s a pretty sight, but I was referring to how beautiful your heart is. After all, it’s what’s created this.”

“Hwaaah!?”

She turned to me, blushing, and I put a hand to my chest and smiled. “You’re a patient, kind, and selfless person. I respect you from the bottom of my heart.”

“I’m really not that amazing...” Airia replied bashfully. Seeing my chance, I leaned in and grabbed her hand.

“I don’t regret pledging to spend the rest of my life with you. Umm, what I mean to say is...”

When Airia had been kidnapped by the goblet, I felt like my heart had been ripped in two. I was a bit dense, but even I realized this feeling was love. And right now was my best chance to confess. The problem was, I didn’t really know how.

“I umm... I’m really not sure how to phrase this, but...”

Great, I’m tripping over my words already. The worst part was I’d been trying to act cool a second ago, so I probably looked doubly lame now. *Get over your embarrassment, goddammit!* Seeing me struggle, Airia chuckled and looked up at me.

“Veight, am I a Demon Lord now?”

“You are, without a doubt, a Demon Lord.”

Only someone with the power of a Demon Lord or a Hero could pull off a miracle like this. *But that’s not important right now. I know I kinda suck at this, but please let me confess.* Airia squeezed my hand and gave me a knowing

smile.

“Then that means the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander will follow me wherever I go, right?”

“Y-Yeah, that’s right.”

“He’s a very sincere, wise, handsome, and selfless vice-commander, right?”

I feel like she’s exaggerating a little, but she is talking about me here, right?

“Setbacks never bother him, but he has such a strong sense of duty that he ends up making promises he can’t keep and he’s terribly awkward when it comes to romance. That’s the kind of vice-commander I’ll have, right?”

Okay, she’s definitely talking about me.

“Yeah...I think that’s the kind of vice-commander he is, anyway.”

I nodded, and Airia smiled mischievously. *I really like that smile.*

“I’m a very wicked Demon Lord, so I’ll never let my vice-commander escape my clutches. I hope you’re ready for me, Veight.”

Wait, is she confessing because she knows I suck at this kind of thing? Thanks for the save, Demon Lord Airia.

Accepting my defeat, I nodded again. “Oh, I’m ready alright. I pledge to spend my life with you, Airia. My heart is yours.”

“You have no idea how happy that makes me. Now then, I have my first order for you as your Demon Lord.”

“Oh?”

“Could you please close your eyes?”

“Okay...?”

The moment I closed my eyes, I felt something soft touch my lips. My heart started pounding right away, but it took me a few seconds to register that this was a kiss.



The moment I closed my eyes, I felt something soft touch my lips. My heart started pounding right away, but it took me a few seconds to register that this was a kiss.

I wanted to see what kind of face Airia was making, but I wasn't sure if it was okay to open my eyes. *Am I allowed to grab her shoulders?* None of my magic grimoires or textbooks prepared me for this. But just standing there would be rude, so I decided to go for it and pulled her close. As I did, she wrapped her arms around me and hugged me tightly. I had no idea how long the kiss lasted, but eventually Airia pulled away. I opened my eyes and saw her staring passionately at me.

"This is the happiest moment of my life."

"As is mine."

Airia frowned, her arms still wrapped around me. "But you know, you could have at least let me kiss you in your human form."

"Huh? Oh!"

I totally forgot I was still transformed!

"Sorry about that. Give me a second."

I hurriedly canceled my transformation. I'd been wearing cheap clothes today so my shirt was in tatters, but there wasn't any time to worry about that now. As soon as I was in my human form, Airia kissed me again. In my human form, I wasn't strong enough to support all of her weight, and I fell back onto the rubble. However Airia was as wicked a Demon Lord as she claimed, and she didn't let me go even then.

I sat down on the rubble next to Airia and looked up at the glittering motes of mana still falling onto the city.

"I wonder how long this will last..." she mused.

"I'd like to know that myself."

Occasionally, I heard werewolves howl in the distance. After I rescued Airia, I'd asked them to see what was going on outside Ryunheit. Judging by their howling, Airia's mana shower kept going as far as the eye could see. *Looks like I*

won't be able to hide this incident. Every time Airia smiled at me, the mana shower grew a little more intense. It appeared to be linked with her emotions somehow.

“Is my mana protecting Ryunheit?”

“Seems like it. I’ve never heard of anyone using mana like this... Though, now that I think about it, it’s not too different from strengthening magic.”

In effect, Airia was casting strengthening magic on the land, rather than on a person. Of course, casting strengthening magic over such a vast area would take a ridiculous amount of mana, but Airia had just that. Theoretically speaking, a spell like this was definitely possible.

As I was contemplating the implications this had for magic as a whole, Airia scooted closer to me. I turned to her and she gave me a hesitant look.

“Should I move?”

Well, it is a little embarrassing when you're this close, but I don't mind.

“Nah. It feels reassuring having you next to me,” I answered honestly, blushing a little. *I wonder what kind of expression I'm making right now?* Smiling, Airia sidled even closer, until our shoulders were touching. *Okay yeah, this is pretty embarrassing.*

“I’ve dreamed of doing this for years.”

“Now I know you’re just exaggerating.”

Less than three years had passed since I broke into Airia’s window the day I conquered Ryunheit. However, Airia just smiled bashfully and said, “Surely you’ve heard the saying ‘A night in love lasts a thousand moons?’”

That was a common saying in Meraldia. It meant that when you were in love, time passed by excruciatingly slowly.

“Fair enough.”

I nodded, thinking back to a Japanese saying that meant something similar.

“Come to think of it, there’s also the saying Ichijitsusenshuu.”

Airia gave me a puzzled look. “Ichijichu...senshu? What does that mean?”

Your pronunciation's off. Meraldian didn't have that saying—A day may last a thousand autumns—so I'd opted to say it in Japanese rather than translate it. It was hardly surprising Airia was confused.

"It means some days can feel as long as a thousand autumns, or a thousand years."

"I see. And it's Ichiji...chusenshu, right?"

Almost, but not quite.

"Well, it's certainly true that each day has felt like an eternity these past few months." Airia didn't probe any further, so I decided to bring the topic up of my own accord. "It's a saying from a different world."

Airia observed my expression for a few seconds, then asked hesitantly, "Are you referring to the same world that thing you called an 'airplane' is from?"

"Yeah."

Airia was dying to know more, but I could tell she was keeping her curiosity in check out of consideration for me. Her self-control really was amazing.

"Are you sure you should be telling me this?"

"I promised I'd tell you everything once this crisis was resolved, remember?"

I got to see every nook and cranny of Airia's heart. It was only fair that I opened my heart up to her as well. Some people might say that there's nothing fair about love, and that it's a battle to see who can win the other over first, but I didn't believe that. Besides, I wanted Airia to know everything about me. I wanted to see if she would still like me after I laid myself bare to her. Most importantly though, I needed to keep my promise for once.

"Umm, Veight? If it's something that's difficult for you to talk about, you don't have to."

"Eh, it's not that big a deal. I'm gonna start with a kind of weird question but... Do you believe in reincarnation?"

"I do. Everyone who follows the Sonnenlicht Order does."

Oh yeah, I forgot the Sonnenlicht Order preached reincarnation. The slaves

who had escaped Rolmund had brought that part of the Sonnenlicht faith with them when they'd settled down in Meraldia.

"Well, I still have my memories of my old life, before I reincarnated into this one."

"Does that mean...the vista I saw in your mindscape was made of memories from your old life?"

"Yeah. Also, demons didn't exist in my previous world. I lived as a human back then. Can you believe that?"

"Of course I can." I was taken aback by the earnestness in Airia's voice. Smiling, she added, "I always thought it was strange you were able to understand humans so well, but now everything makes sense."

True, me being a human in my past life explained why I was able to get along with humans despite being a werewolf. And it was hardly surprising that Airia had picked up on that inconsistency long ago.

"But then, doesn't that mean life as a werewolf must have been difficult for you?" she asked.

"Err, well, a little..."

Werewolves were all muscleheads who tried to solve all their problems with violence. I had to keep getting stronger in order to maintain my position as the werewolves' leader. Fortunately, I was able to borrow the old Demon Lord's authority to help cement my status later on. However, while it had been a long, hard road, I'd grown fond of demons now.

"But you know, werewolves treasure their packmates and would never betray them. It may not seem like it, but I was blessed with a wonderful family."

"I know. After spending so much time around Fahn and Vodd, I'm starting to understand what kind of race werewolves are."

"Yeah, we always look after our own. There's nothing more reassuring than being with your pack."

That's why I've been working so hard to create a world where werewolves can live in peace.

“In the end though, I was never able to fully become a werewolf. On the inside, I’m still a human. Plus, the country I lived in during my past life was a peaceful country free from war.”

It was probably hard to believe that the famous bloodthirsty Black Werewolf King, the same guy who slaughtered 400 Thuvan soldiers, had actually lived a peaceful life. But to my surprise, Airia seemed to take my revelation in stride.

“That makes sense, too. The only time you ever kill is when you’re out on the battlefield. I’ve never seen you harm anyone who lacks the will to fight.”

“Do you think I’m too soft?”

“My military instructor probably would have said so. He believed that a commander who cares for the well-being of his enemies was a failure.”

Figures. I frowned, but then Airia added with a bashful smile, “But I love that side of you. Even though you’re unbelievably strong, you’re more interested in stopping wars than starting them. It’s strange, but reassuring at the same time.”

“Thanks. I think I needed to hear that,” I said with a small smile. *Reassuring, huh?*

Looking thoughtful, Airia asked, “But why haven’t you told anyone your secret before?”

“I felt like there was no reason to...”

Airia’s expression grew serious, and she addressed me not as her lover, but as the city’s viceroy, “The city I saw in your mindscape was filled with countless sprawling towers. It’s clear the world you lived in was far more advanced than Meraldia.”

“Indeed. Nations in our world had passed Meraldia and Wa’s level of technological progress centuries ago.”

Of course, the countries of this world were all at different levels of cultural and technological progress, but none of them were close to modern Earth. Rolmund was on the cusp of a magical version of the industrial revolution, though, which made me anxious for the future.

“If you possess knowledge from such an advanced world, couldn’t you pass it

on to the demon army and make them even stronger?" Airia asked.

"Well, actually..."

Someone already started doing that, decades before I did. Hey, Friedensrichter, I bet it was pretty hard, bringing modern technology to this world. But I bet it was a ton of fun, too.

I explained to Airia that the previous Demon Lord had already been doing that by the time I joined the army. Technically this was classified information, but as the Demon Ambassador, Airia had the honorary rank of commander.

"In the end, he'd beaten me to the punch, so I decided the best thing I could do was give the old Demon Lord my full support."

"That sounds so very much like you, Veight."

What's that supposed to mean? Well, whatever, if she's happy then I'm happy. Honestly, I was relieved that Airia was taking it all in stride. I was pretty nervous about revealing my secret to anyone, since normally you'd think someone claiming they have memories of a past life was crazy. If someone from Japan had told me "In my past life I was a werewolf! I lived in a country called Meraldia!" I would have definitely thought they were crazy.

After a few seconds, Airia's gentle smile suddenly vanished. "I imagine you must find the people of this world uncivilized and barbaric."

"Huh?"

"Is the reason you seemed so uninterested in romance before because—"

"Oh no, definitely not!" I firmly refuted Airia's words. "No matter how advanced civilizations get, people's hearts remain the same. In fact, no one I met in my old life was as kind and as pure of heart as you are, Airia."

There were probably people as nice as Airia back on Earth, but I never saw any of them; probably because everyone around me had so much on their plate at all times.

"I love you, but I also trust and respect you, Airia."

If anything, I probably fell in love with Airia because I respected her as a person.

“Which is why, umm...”

Dammit, I’m tripping over my words again.

“What I mean to say is uh...”

Crap, what was it I wanted to say again? Unable to find the right words, I decided to go back to basics.

“The point is, I really do love you.”

God, I’m as eloquent as a preschooler. Despite the awkwardness of my confession, though, Airia smiled.

“Thank you, Veight. I love you, too.”

After staring at me for a few seconds, Airia looked forward again. She then rested her head against my shoulder, trying to make the action look as natural as possible. Sadly she couldn’t fool my nose, and I could tell that she was super nervous. That being said, I was pretty nervous too. Stiff as boards, the two of us silently looked up at the night sky. *I guess I didn’t need to say anything. I forgot there are some things you don’t need words to convey.*

It turned out the mana Airia emitted covered all of Meraldia, not just Ryunheit. I learned much later that the “Shining Snow,” as it came to be called later, fell as far north as Draulight. In fact, it was possible some snow might have fallen beyond the mountains as well. The next morning, I became very busy dealing with the aftermath of Airia’s miraculous phenomenon.

“And that’s everything that happened last night,” I told Kite, who was nodding along to my story. He quickly organized the most important pieces of information and started writing a report summarizing last night’s events. *Man, he can write fast.* On top of that, his unique formatting style made his reports really easy to read.

As he wrote at blistering speed, Kite said, “I measured Lady Airia’s mana capacity again, as you requested.”

“What’re the results?”

“She has more than eight hundred times as much mana as I do.”

Wow, she's still got a ton. Kite's mana capacity wasn't especially low or anything; it was pretty average for a human. Epoch magic used up little mana, so he had more than enough for his needs. Werewolves possessed two to three times as much mana as humans on average, but right now, Airia had more mana than the entire werewolf unit combined. If you handed her a Blast Rifle, she'd be able to fire cannonball-sized shots.

Still, I was relieved. According to Kite's estimates, Ason's Legendary Treasure had possessed millions of times more mana than him, and hundreds of thousands of times more mana than me. That meant Airia had used up the vast majority of her mana reserves with that one spell. She was no longer superhuman. Of course, she still had a large stockpile of mana left, but it was no longer enough to change the world. There was little worry of a Hero appearing now. *I hope.*

"Oh yeah, what's my mana capacity look like now?"

Kite shot me a brief glance, then returned to his paperwork.

"You've got exactly one thousand times as much mana as me."

It appeared I'd retained a good amount of the goblet's mana in that last transfer. In fact, this meant I possessed more mana than Airia. *I wonder if I just have a better affinity towards mana?* Either way, if I used all that mana to strengthen myself, I'd be able to run at the speed of sound.

"I wonder if our mana will eventually go back to base level, or if Airia and I are just going to have this much mana now..."

"Epoch magic can't find that out, so I'm afraid you'll have to ask someone else."

The reason Kite was being so curt was because he was focused on writing. Honestly, I was amazed he could work on so many difficult tasks at once. *His brain's made of sterner stuff than mine, that's for sure.*

I was worried about where my relationship with Airia was going to go from here, but for the moment, I had far more pressing concerns that required my attention. First of all, I needed to explain what had happened to the council. After that, I needed to explain to Wa why I'd taken Ason's Legendary Treasure,

and compensate them for breaking the treaty. I also needed to let Rolmund know that we'd found Draulight's Legacy and destroyed it. *Just thinking about it all makes me depressed.* As I was lamenting all the work waiting for me, Airia strode into the room.

"Lord Veight, we've moved the citizens who evacuated back into their homes. Repairs on the sewer have begun as well."

"Thank you, Lady Airia."

Though we'd affirmed our feelings for each other, we had agreed it was best if we kept using each other's titles at work. However, the two of us shared a brief smile after Airia finished her report. There was something about Airia's smile that put me at ease. As we stared into each other's eyes, Kite gathered his documents and rose to his feet.

"Should I go to another room to finish this report?"

"Huh? Oh, sure, if you want."

It was only after he left the room that I realized Kite had left to give us some space. *Actually, on second thought, that's probably his way of passively-aggressively complaining that I'm getting in the way of his work. Sorry, Kite.*

—Kite's Woes—

"Haaah..."

Sighing, I dropped a bundle of papers onto my desk. When Veight had handed me that memo the day Lady Airia had been taken over, I'd been caught totally by surprise. Somehow I'd managed to keep a straight face. *At least, I think I did anyway.* Then I evacuated the citizens like Veight ordered. But that whole affair really drove home how much Veight relies on me. *I'm glad he trusts me this much, and it's thanks to him that I was able to get revenge for those knights who died protecting me.*

I was quite fond of Veight. Not only did he respect my talents, he treated me well. It was only natural that I'd come to respect him in turn. Especially considering he was Meraldia's—no, the whole continent's—savior. Of course, I respected Lady Airia as well. Even though she was a viceroy, she didn't abuse

her authority in the slightest. She was a totally different kind of ruler than those old bastards in the Senate.

Seeing the two of them get together made me feel warm and fuzzy inside. *Seriously, they should just get hitched already.* The problem was, Veight was too unassertive. The same guy who showed no fear on the battlefield was so cautious and hesitant when it came to relationships. He took everything way too slow.

I returned to my paperwork, but writing reports was second nature to me at this point. While I worked on autopilot, I couldn't help but overhear bits of the conversation going on next to me.

"So...umm, well..."

"Yes?"

"Lady Airia..."

"We're alone now, so you can just call me by my name."

"O-Oh yeah...good point."

Don't mind me, just keep flirting.

"Airia. I'm still not used to our new relationship. I'm not doing anything to make you uncomfortable, am I?"

"No, not at all. You've been a perfect gentleman."

"I see..."

Shouldn't you move the conversation forward now? Granted, it's not like I'm an expert on romance, so maybe I'm wrong.

"To be honest, I'm still a little scared."

"Scared of what, exactly? I never imagined there was anything the great Black Werewolf King feared."

"I thought so too, but I guess I'm more of a coward than I figured. I'm constantly afraid I might do something to hurt you, or make you hate me."

Nice one. I could see how Veight had managed to win Airia's heart. Unsurprisingly, Veight's response put Airia in a good mood.

“I would never hate you. Nor do I mind being hurt by you.”

“You’re really strong, Airia.”

“You’re the one who made me strong, Veight.”

Nice going, Lady Airia. Both of them were late bloomers, but now that they’d found their footing, it was fun listening to them flirt. At the same time though, it was getting kind of awkward to stay here. *I should probably go around now, huh?* Lacy’s research lab was usually empty around this time, so I decided to go there.

I scratched my head awkwardly as I watched Kite leave. *I need to focus on work.* Just as I thought that, a rift appeared in the space in front of my desk.

“I have returned,” Master declared, floating a few feet off the ground.

“Welcome home, Master.”

“Welcome back, Your Majesty.”

“My apologies for returning so late. I finally finished negotiations with the fungoids.” Master touched down onto the floor and walked over to me.

“Veight, thank you for taking care of this latest crisis in my absence.”

“Err, unfortunately solving it caused a bit of a diplomatic problem, so...”

I gave Master a brief explanation on why using Ason’s Legendary Treasure to free Airia from the other goblet’s mind control was an issue. I also told her that I was planning on quitting the Commonwealth Council.

Sighing, Master replied, “This is hardly something you need to resign over. I imagine you’re feeling guilty about what you did, and you think quitting is the fastest way to atone?”

“Well...”

Master could read me like a book.

“Whether or not you’re still qualified to be a councilor is something the council should decide, not you. Why not ask them what they think? I promise not to influence their decision.” Master then loudly cleared her throat and said in a solemn voice, “Regardless of the council’s decision, I am still your superior

within the demon army. Veight, I have a few orders for you.”

“What are they?”

There was a hard glint in Master’s eyes. “In a few days, I will formally remove you from your post as my vice-commander. My decision here is final.”

“Master!? But—”

I cut myself off as I remembered that right now she was not my master, but the Demon Lord. I had expected to pay for my mistakes, but this was far too harsh a punishment. My entire *raison d’être* was supporting others from the shadows, and if I was going to spend my life supporting someone, I might as well support the most powerful person in my organization. That was why I’d enjoyed being the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander for so long. The thought of being removed from Master’s side filled me with dread.

As I languished, she just smiled and said, “No need to look so alarmed. You will continue being a Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander.”

“I don’t understand...”

Actually, wait. I think I do. Master cheerfully declared, “I shall be entrusting my position to Airia Lutt Aindorf. Henceforth, she will be the demon army’s third Demon Lord, as well as the chief of the Commonwealth Council.”

“Your Majesty!?” Airia shouted, surprised. To be honest, that caught me by surprise as well. Master’s smile grew rueful, and she dismissively waved her hand in front of her face.

“The seventeen cities of Meraldia were built by humans. It stands to reason that a human should be the one to govern them. It is not as though Airia would chase demons out of Meraldia if she became its ruler, correct?”

Well, yeah, no way she’d do that. At this point, demons were an integral part of Meraldia’s workforce.

“Then what are you going to do, Master?”

“I plan to become the demon army’s first Demon Empress. I do feel bad for creating a higher ranking position for myself, but I feel like my talents would be best used aiding the new Demon Lord in her rule.”

“Ah, so you’ll basically be like the prime minister.”

In other words, practically nothing would change.

“I shall endeavor to rule well, so that the people come to love Demon Empress Movi.”

No matter how hard you try, that nickname is never catching on. Wait, hang on a second.

“So when you said I would still be a Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander, you meant...”

“Indeed. You shall be the new Demon Lord, Airia’s Vice-Commander. Be sure to serve her well.”

“What!?”

Is this her way of supporting our relationship? It’s gotta be. Just look at how smug that grin is.

“What do you think? A clever solution, is it not?”

“Haah... I guess so.”

In the end, this meant my job wouldn’t really change, so I decided to just go with it.

“Very well. I shall support the new Demon Lord to the best of my ability, Demon Empress.”

“I expect great things from you, Vice-Commander.”

I glanced back and saw that Airia was still recovering from her shock. “I’m... I’m going to be a Demon Lord!?”

“Correct. It matters not whether you are a human or a demon. The world I aim to create is one where no one sees a problem with a human being the leader of the demon army.”

“But will the other demons really accept me as their ruler!?”

Master pointed at me. “Fear not. He’ll make sure they do.”

“Wait, what!? Master!?”

“Veight has been serving as the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander since the time of the first Demon Lord. So long as he accepts you as the commander of the demon army, the other demons will follow suit. If there are any who question your authority, feel free to beat them into submission.”

That’s the demon way alright. And so, I was reassigned from being the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander to being the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander. Master had basically offered me to Airia as a housewarming gift for her new role. However, even if this was what Master wanted, she couldn’t just pick a new Demon Lord without consulting anyone.

“Master, have you discussed this with the council?”

“I only just returned from the forest. Naturally, I haven’t had time to do that.”

“You can’t just go deciding this stuff on your own, Master, you need to get everyone’s approval first!”

“Oh, be quiet. Getting the others’ approval is a vice-commander’s job. I expect you to persuade them quickly. This is my last order as your Demon Lord.”

Master certainly loved dumping impossible tasks onto me. I wanted to talk her out of rushing things, but Airia looked happy with this development, so I swallowed my complaints.

“Veight, I think the Demon Lord made the right choice. I know I’m inexperienced, but you’ll be here to support me, right?”

“Airia, are you sure you want to be a Demon Lord?”

“Yes. I’ll be getting a dependable vice-commander if I do, so it seems like a worthwhile deal.”

I did promise I would be her vice-commander. Though, when I said that, I meant I’d help her take care of any Heroes that tried to kill her, not that I’d become her administrative assistant. *Me and my big mouth.*

“I want to do my best to improve relations between humans and demons. Please help me build a world where we can coexist, Veight.”

“O-Okay...”

Damn, I'm not gonna be able to refuse, am I? It was then that Master decided to chip in with, "Accept your fate, Veight. You'll be Airia's vice-commander forever."

Fine, fine. Sheesh. Sighing, I bowed to Airia. "I swear to aid you in all your endeavors, now and forever."

"Your oath has been accepted," Airia replied with a smile.

Master looked satisfied as well. "Isn't that great, Airia?"

"Yes, yes it is. Thank you very much, Your Majesty."

"I know my disciple can be dense, but he's a good man. Though I suppose you know that better than anyone."

"Well, I..."

Airia blushed and looked away. *Guess I'll have to work even harder than before,* I thought as I scratched my head awkwardly.

—The Demon Empress' Ramblings—

"Good grief," I muttered as I eased my body into a chair.

While I rolled my shoulders, I suffused my limbs with mana. This ancient body was beginning to fall apart, so I needed to make sure I continually reinforced it with magic. Looking out the window, I spotted Airia, my Demon Lord replacement, going out to greet the envoy from Thuvan. Veight was standing next to her with a relaxed smile on his face.

"Ehehe..."

I never imagined I would live to see the day one of my blockheaded disciples found a partner. Melaine was a vampire and therefore had no interest in marriage, while Parker's body was all bones. Even those who could find partners seemed content to remain unattached for now. Though I imagined some, like Ryucco, were better off single. He would only make life miserable for his wife if he found one. *Thinking back on it, I suppose Veight is the only disciple of mine I wished to see married off. I must say, it's quite a relief to see that he's finally settling down.* I felt as though I had finally fulfilled my final duty as his

master.

“Oh, Master? What’re you doing here?” Firnir asked, poking her head inside my study. *Finding a husband for her will be quite a struggle as well...*

“Hello, Firnir. Aren’t you supposed to be here on official business?”

“Yeah, but I dumped all the annoying responsibilities onto my human advisors.”

Is that something a viceroy should do? I cannot say I’m too knowledgeable about politics, though. Perhaps this is how all leaders act.

“It’s heartening to see you’re as lively as always.”

“Ehehe. I’m feeling great today!” she replied with a beatific smile.

I floated onto Firnir’s back and started patting her head.

“Hey, cut that out! I’m not a kid anymore, Master.”

Despite her complaints, Firnir made no attempt to move her head away. She put on a tough front, but she was still a spoiled child on the inside.

“This is a bit sudden, but have you given any thought to getting married?”

“Hmm. I don’t think I’ll marry until Shatina gets married at least.”

Shatina said the same thing when I asked her. Do both of you plan to be single forever?

“Well, no matter. Be sure to support the new Demon Lord and her Vice-Commander.”

“I will! Now your job’ll be easier too, right, Master?”

“Correct. Thanks to my brilliant disciples, my workload has been lessening every year. I am truly grateful to you all.”

“Ehehe.”

I patted Firnir’s head again and glanced out of the window.

“Taking Veight under my wing transformed not only the demon army, but my life as well...” I mused absently.

“Vaito’s amazing, isn’t he?”

“Indeed. He is likely the first demon to conquer a human city and then win its residents over. At the very least, I know of no other such cases in Meraldia’s history.”

Firnir’s face scrunched up at the mere mention of the word “history.” *Perhaps I should change the topic before this turns into a lecture.*

“Of course, Veight’s skill was integral to bringing the demon army and Ryunheit together, but let us not forget that Airia’s insight and wisdom was what made such a feat possible.”

“Oh yeah, I guess you’re right. Airia’s super amazing too!”

Rejoice while you can, Firnir. You will have to suffer my history lectures eventually.

“Though everyone calls me a demon now, my body and mind are those of a human. So I understand better than most that there is little that truly separates our species. However, humans are constantly looking to otherize those that are even slightly different than them.”

“Really?”

“Race, religion, social class, nationality; humans try to use all sorts of things to differentiate themselves from each other. Despite this, Veight was able to overcome all of those boundaries and find common ground with the people of Meraldia. It may be strange for a mage to say this, but it almost seems like magic.”

Firnir was starting to nod off, so I decided to cut my ramblings short, “My point is, life is always full of surprises.”

Even at my age, I was able to experience new things every day. *Whoops, I almost launched into another long story...*

In order to fulfill Master’s unreasonable request, I sent messengers out to the other cities regarding her proclamation, and went directly to the nearby ones to let the viceroys know. Some of the northern viceroys weren’t happy about a southern viceroy becoming the new Demon Lord, but it was an undeniable fact

that Ryunheit had become the political and economic center of the Commonwealth. In the end, they accepted Master's proposition without much opposition. If anything, it was negotiating with the southern viceroys that caused me more trouble. Not because they were against the idea, though.

"Oh thank god. I was always worried you'd never be able to find a wife. Airia's a good match for you, so I can rest easy now," was Melaine's reaction.

"Oooh, congrats! When're you guys holding the wedding!? Weddings are great, y'know! They're like the start of life's greatest journey! Though you might run into some stormy seas after you set sail!" was how Garsh responded.

"You certainly took your sweet time in finding a wife. Ah yes, would you mind letting me interview you? I need to make a play about your epic romance. In return, I'll organize the most lavish wedding you've ever seen for the two of you," was all Forne had to say.

"So you're finally getting married. In truth, there's this nomad lady that I fancy as well and I was wondering if you could... Are you listening to me, Lord Veight?" Aram spent the whole meeting telling me about his love life.

"Congratulations Masteeeeeeeeer! I'm sooo happy for you!" And Shatina was just a blubbering mess.

Guys, there's a new Demon Empress claiming to be the ruler of the country, who cares about my private life right now? There's more important things you should be thinking about. Regardless, it seemed everyone was willing to accept Master as Meraldia's Demon Empress. That also meant that a human was going to be the official head of state, so it made sense that the other viceroys were okay with it. We still needed to codify the exact responsibilities and authority the Demon Empress would be granted, but that was a problem for the Commonwealth Council. Most viceroys had legal professionals in their employ, so they could ask them to draft up a formal charter. Since I wasn't from this world, I didn't know how the legal system really worked. Leaving this to the experts was for the best. All that was left now was to convince the demons to accept Airia as their Demon Lord.

"Umm, Veight?" A young forest giant hesitantly raised his hand, and I turned

to him.

“Yes?”

He exchanged a few glances with his friends, then worked up the courage to ask, “So does that mean a human...is our Demon Lord?”

Despite his massive frame, the giant’s voice was barely a whisper. Airia and I had gone to Grenchtat castle to speak with the representatives of the various demon tribes. Since this was supposed to be the Demon Lord’s castle, it technically belonged to Airia. In practice though, Master was going to continue using it as her base of operations. Still, it was important for the demons living here to know who their new Demon Lord was.

I swept my gaze over the gathered demon generals and replied, “That’s right. By Demon Empress Gomoviroa’s decree, Airia has become our new Demon Lord. She was already the Demon Ambassador, so this promotion should hardly come as a surprise.”

“I-If you say so...”

The young giant fell silent. The only giant soldiers that had survived the massacre of the north were the cowardly ones who belonged mostly to the engineering or messenger corps. All of the brave fighters had been slaughtered by Arshes. Their size had worked against them, making them easy targets. But even these cowardly giants were still demons at their core. They would only serve someone stronger than them. A weak leader would only drag down the group and lead to everyone’s deaths. That belief was firmly ingrained within all demons.

I turned to Airia, who looked a little nervous, and said, “Lady Airia, why don’t you give everyone a demonstration of the new Demon Lord’s strength?”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

Airia still had 800 times as much mana as Kite, so she was easily stronger than anyone here. I gave her a confident nod. She sucked in a deep breath, then resolutely stepped forward. The assembled giants, ogres, dragonkin, and werewolves were all far larger and more imposing than her. But Airia didn’t look frightened in the slightest.

“I have been chosen as your new leader! If there are any who doubt my strength, come forward! In accordance with demon tradition, I shall make you submit by force!”

The years she’d spent serving as viceroy had made Airia quite adept at giving speeches. Surprised that a human woman would be so bold in front of a demon audience, none of the generals stepped forward to challenge her. Most of the violence-loving ones had already died, so the Demon Army as a whole was a lot mellower than it used to be.

I turned to the giant who’d first spoken and asked, “What’s your name?”

“It’s Zwuga, sir... If it’s too hard to pronounce you can just call me Zuga.”

It’s fine, I’m used to pronouncing weird names now.

“Zwuga, would you like to test your strength against the new Demon Lord?”

“Huh!?” He seemed like a nice man, so he was probably worried he’d hurt Airia. “V-Veight, I know I’m not the bravest giant, but I’m not weak! Oh, I’m sorry for yelling.”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry, I know you’re plenty strong, even for a giant. After all, you were strong enough to get accepted into the engineering corps.”

All the giants in the engineering corps were strong enough to lift multiple trees at once. They were as strong as bulldozers, and far more agile. I had complimented him to avoid hurting his pride, but nothing I said was a lie.

“But you know, the Demon Lord might be even stronger than you.”

“What? How...”

Zwuga glanced uneasily between me and Airia. It was common knowledge that giants were stronger than humans, but now I, the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander, was saying she was stronger than him.

“It’ll be faster if you just see for yourself. Humor me and fight one small bout against Lady Airia.”

Seeing no way out, Zwuga hesitantly stepped forward. Airia looked pretty nervous, which was understandable considering she was up against a three-meter tall giant.

“There’s no need to go easy on me, Zwuga,” Airia said as they squared off.

“I-If you say so.”

Airia held out a hand, and Zwuga shook it.

“Push her down with all your might, Zwuga,” I said, and the young giant steeled himself. He may have been more cowardly than the other giants, but he was still a member of the demon army, and soldiers never backed down from a challenge.

“Hrrrrgh!”

Zwuga lunged forward and shoved Airia as hard as he could, but she didn’t budge. She looked surprised at the result herself, but I knew her vast mana reserves would keep her safe. At the moment of impact, her mana coalesced around her, forming a layer of armor. Airia also drove stakes of mana into the ground to keep herself rooted in place. The demons watched in awe as Zwuga failed to push Airia back even an inch. Recovering from his initial shock, Zwuga put all of his weight behind him and pushed harder.

“Raaaah!”

His shout reverberated through the castle. Smiling, Airia simply flicked her wrist. Zwuga, who must have weighed at least a few hundred kilos, was sent flying.

“Nuwaaaaah!?”

He hit the ground hard enough to shake the entire castle.

“Looks like we have our winner,” I declared, calling an end to the match. All of the demon warriors fell silent. They’d just seen irrevocable proof that a human woman was stronger than all of them. Of course, this meant they would submit to her rule without complaint.

As she was now, Airia could easily throw a giant 100 meters if she was so inclined. That’s how much power 800 Kite’s worth of mana granted. She couldn’t exactly exhibit 800 times the physical strength of a normal human since mana didn’t convert 1:1 like that, but she could easily buff herself to 100 times the strength of a normal person. Zwuga should have felt no heavier than

a bowling ball to her. Beating him in a contest of strength was a piece of cake. If Airia learned how to use her mana efficiently, she'd grow even stronger.

Despite how easily she claimed victory, Airia didn't lord it over her opponent. In fact, she walked over to Zwuga with a worried look on her face and held out a hand to him.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"Oh, no...giants are pretty sturdy, so..."

"That's a relief."

Even after gaining ungodly amounts of power, Airia was still the same kind person she'd always been. She was like Master in that regard. I looked back at the speechless demons and said, "Are you willing to accept her as your Demon Lord now?"

Everyone nodded. Challenging each other to contests of strength was a daily occurrence for demons. Chances were, more demons would show up in the future to challenge Airia's right to rule, but she'd be able to handle them.

Once the demons were pacified, I had to do a bunch of miscellaneous work for the council in preparation for Airia's formal ascension ceremony. I also had to tell the council what had happened with Ason's Legendary Treasure and find some way to make it up to Wa. Apparently, Fumino had already returned home and reported what I'd done to the Chrysanthemum Court. After a few days, she returned to Ryunheit and told me the Chrysanthemum Court was willing to forgive my transgression as long as I used my knowledge as a Divine to help Wa whenever they needed it.

Airia's ascension ceremony was drawing close as well, and before I knew it, I'd missed my chance to tell the council I would retire to make up for breaking the treaty. *Wait, was that Master's plan all along? Keeping me so busy I can't resign?* When I had a spare moment, I tracked Master down and asked her directly.

"Master, you knew I'd be too busy to bring up my resignation, didn't you?"

"Who can say."

Master gave me a playful grin and sipped on her tea.

Soon enough, the day of Airia's ascension ceremony arrived. All of Meraldia's prominent nobles had been invited, and Rynheit was filled with viceroys and knights. The demon army's generals were all present as well, packed together with the human knights in Rynheit's main square.

"We may have invited a few too many people," Master mused as she looked down at the throng from her podium. She was trying to sound calm, but I could see her knees shaking.

"Keep it together, Master. You have to give this speech, or you'll be stuck as the Demon Lord forever."

"I know, I know...but human crowds make me so nervous."

Master lost her family to an invading human army. The fear and despair she'd felt as she saw her loved ones cut down in front of her was still deeply engraved onto her heart. As I was still Master's vice-commander for the next few minutes, I walked over to support her.

"Don't worry. Everyone here respects you as the Demon Lord. Besides..."

"Besides what?"

"If you felt like it, you could kill everyone here anytime, right? I bet the humans waiting outside are way more nervous than you."

In fact, I could smell their anxiety from all the way over here. It was hardly surprising. Master was the world's strongest necromancer, and she had the ability to absorb all forms of energy.

"Plus, you've braved actual battlefields already—a speech should be nothing."

"Fighting is within the Demon Lord's purview, that is something I have no issue doing. But large groups of humans still terrify me."

"If you can gather your resolve to fight, then surely you can gather enough to talk. None of these people mean you any ill will."

"Yes, yes, I understand. Now be quiet for a moment."

I guess I've got one last job to do as Master's vice-commander.

"I'll go out there with you. If you freeze up or something, I'll take over so there's nothing to worry about."

"Hmm, if you say so." She breathed a sigh of relief and gave me a small smile. "Very well, let us get this over with. Follow me."

You were just trying to manipulate me to come with you, weren't you? Master walked up to the top of the podium and looked down at the crowd. I stayed a short distance behind her, ready to step in if she needed support. She briefly glanced in my direction and gave me a reassuring smile. *Looks like everything'll be okay.*

"Everyone, I am the demon army's second Demon Lord, Gomoviroa. When I was still human I went by the name Gomoviroa Zoarks Gaor Gelfaval Gerun. I belonged to the Old Dynasty's royal family."

This was my first time hearing Master's full name. It sounded kinda cute. *I wonder why she gave her full name? Is this part of some ancient formality?*

Master raised her face and bared her pale throat to the crowd. "Behold. When our enemies invaded, one of their soldiers sliced open my throat. The wound was grave, and I was on the verge of death."

Lacy, who was waiting beside me, used illusion magic to enlarge Master's form and make the scar more clearly visible. Normally it was faint enough that you wouldn't notice it unless she pointed it out, but Master could make it more vivid if she so chose.

"The Old Dynasty fell when it splintered into numerous kingdoms that began to war with each other. I did not know it at the time, but many of those kingdoms created magical artifacts to artificially birth Heroes. The leaders of those kingdoms were fools."

Those goblets, huh? Ason's Legendary Treasure had been relatively simple, so it had probably been made during the start of this period, whereas Draulight's Legacy had a far more complex structure, suggesting that it had been made near the end of this "warring states" era.

"Heroes and Demons Lords have historically been those who possess

supernatural might. However, the majority of this world's people are average citizens. They do not need a superbeing to rule over them."

Master was plenty superhuman herself, but that was precisely why she wasn't comfortable being the Demon Lord. She had no clue how politics functioned or what normal people needed in their day-to-day lives.

"It is not one's swordsmanship or magical might that makes them fit to rule. And if someone unfit to rule sits on the throne, then the entire nation suffers."

The first half of her message was directed toward the demons, while the second half was for the humans. Both the demon warriors and the human nobles listened to Master's speech with conflicted expressions.

"What a ruler truly needs is the foresight to see what will come, and the courage to push against the status quo. In my opinion, anyone who can do those two things deserves to be a Demon Lord."

Master was trying to change the meaning of the term "Demon Lord." At this point, the Demon Lord she was envisioning was a far cry from the Demon Lord that showed up in video games in my past life. Honestly, it was pretty exciting to think about.

"It is for this reason that I am appointing Airia Lutt Aindorf as Meraldia's next Demon Lord. She has already received the approval of the demon army, as well as the Commonwealth Council."

The council members and demon generals that were sitting in the podium's VIP seats all nodded at Master's words. I nodded as well.

"Henceforth, I...umm..."

Crap, she's forgotten her lines. Master might look young, but she was centuries old. And she was getting forgetful in her old age. I quickly strode forward and picked up where she left off.

"Henceforth, the title of Demon Lord shall be passed down from Demon Lord Gomoviroa to Demon Lord Airia Lutt Aindorf!"

Master breathed an audible sigh of relief. Giving that speech must have been nerve-wracking for her. *You did good, Master.*

At my signal, Airia walked forward. She was wearing an opulent formal coat that had been custom-made by Veira's best tailors. However, like all of her clothes, it was a man's garment, and she looked like the male protagonist of a dramatic opera. That being said, I thought she looked better in men's clothes than a dress anyway. In fact, she looked absolutely stunning. Her father's sabre hung from her waist, matching the outfit perfectly.

She bowed to Master, and a group of attendants brought forth her crown. There were a few seconds before they reached the podium, and in that brief moment, I gave Lacy a covert signal. She brandished her staff and started chanting an amplification spell so that the crowd would be able to hear Airia and Master's conversation. A spell like this was child's play for a first-rate illusionist like her. In fact, back when she'd worked for the senate, her primary job had been to enhance audio and visual effects to make things seem more impressive.

Airia smiled at Master and said, "I am honored by your praise, Your Majesty. I hope to become a Demon Lord worthy of your expectations."

"It heartens me to hear you say that. There may yet be hope for humanity now that they have a wise leader like you to guide them."

"Thank you for your kind words."



Ahahaha, yes. Excellent. Show off just how much you trust each other to the spectators. Letting everyone hear their conversation hadn't been part of the original itinerary, but adding little touches like this was part of a vice-commander's job. Judging by the crowd's reaction, broadcasting the conversation had been the right choice. Even the dragonkin, who rarely showed their emotions, were nodding in approval.

Airia knelt down until she was eye level with Master and took Master's small, cold hands into her own.

"I humbly accept the title of Demon Lord."

"Thank you."

Perfect. While I was internally celebrating, Master suddenly went on a tangent I hadn't expected.

"Please take good care of my disciple, Veight."

"Of course. It's only thanks to him that I feel confident becoming a Demon Lord."

"Good, good. Incidentally, you should know that he flails about in his sleep quite often."

"Y-Yes, I know."

Wait. Stop. Stop right now! This is being broadcast live, you know!? No one needed to hear this. Unfortunately, it was already too late. Once Master started talking about her disciples, she droned on for hours. Smiling, she started gushing about me to the whole city.

"Veight is a skilled mage and a powerful warrior, but his real value lies in his ability to understand others and search for solutions that leave both parties happy."

"I agree completely. His true strength lies in his kindness."

"I knew you would understand."

I hurriedly signaled to Lacy to end the broadcast. But Lacy ignored my messages and kept the spell going. A second later Kite walked up to her and

whispered, “Don’t stop the spell no matter what. We need to make sure Veight doesn’t have any excuse to chicken out of marrying Lady Airia.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

Not good. Dammit, I can’t believe my own vice-commander betrayed me! I turned around, hoping the canine attendants had finished bringing the crown to the podium. Once the coronation started, they’d be forced to cut this conversation short, but the attendants had stopped halfway up the staircase and were listening intently. I’d picked the canines to be the ones to bring Airia her crown because they were the demons that looked the least threatening, but I forgot about their tendency to get distracted. *Stop wagging your tails and get your butts over here!* I wanted to drag them over myself, but since I was in the public eye, I couldn’t do anything unsightly. *Argh, I didn’t think my plan would backfire on me like this. I guess this just proves I’m not a good strategist.* The whole time I was agonizing, Master continued telling Airia embarrassing stories about me.

“Veight never takes proper care of his appearance, so be sure to coordinate his wardrobe for him. Or he may end up embarrassing you in public. Sadly, his fashion sense cannot be trusted.”

Look, I’m not from this world, it’s not my fault I don’t know what local fashion customs are!

“I’m aware. Though, personally, I find Lord Veight’s outfits rather cute.”

What are you grinning about, Airia? Please, just stop. I can’t take it anymore. Afterwards, the coronation went off without a hitch, and Airia officially became Meraldia’s new Demon Lord. She gave a wonderful speech that would probably go down in history, but I was too busy wallowing in shame to pay attention to most of it.

—The Demon Lord’s Speech—

Feeling a little nervous, Airia addressed the crowd gathered before her.

“Everyone, I, Airia Lutt Aindorf, viceroy of Ryunheit, have assumed the post of

Meraldia's Demon Lord."

Airia purposely chose to call it a "post." The viceroys and nobles easily picked up on the nuance behind that, and Airia quickly confirmed their suspicions.

"That's right, I have no intention of treating my promotion as an ascension to some lofty title. Demon Lords are not kings who pass their throne on to their descendants; they are leaders who must choose their successors based on ability, not bloodline. I hope to prove through my deeds that I am worthy of this position, and I expect those who follow after me to do the same."

Only members of a royal line could become kings. Those who lacked royal blood could never become rulers, no matter how able they were. Such people often ended up breaking off and forming their own kingdoms, usually after much bloodshed.

"Demon Empress Gomoviroa has graciously left the title of Demon Lord in human hands, rather than demon ones. This, more than anything, is proof that demons trust humans and wish to live peacefully with us. We must not betray that trust!"

The demon generals were all nodding along, but it was unclear how much they understood of human politics. *Fortunately, I'm sure Veight understands. I know I can trust him to support me,* Airia thought to herself. It was because she had faith in him that she'd been willing to entrust Ryunheit's future to him in the first place. Thus far, Veight had never let her down. In fact, he'd exceeded all expectations and led Meraldia down a path of peace and prosperity.

Turning around, she saw Veight standing with his back straight and expression stern behind her. As always, seeing him filled her with strength. Though this time around he seemed a little shaken. *I guess even he can't keep his emotions in check for such a momentous occasion... But that just makes him more endearing.* Reassured by Veight's solid presence, Airia turned back to the crowd.

"The time has come for Meraldia to look outwards. Rolmund to the north is a vast, powerful empire while Wa to the east has a long history of technological advancement and stable governance. We must learn from our neighbors' triumphs, as well as help them when they are in need."

Airia was paying a bit of lip service to the foreign dignitaries attending the ceremony, but this was also a message to her own people.

“By ending our petty conflicts and joining forces with demons, Meraldia has grown vastly in influence and seen an era of unmatched prosperity. But we cannot let ourselves grow complacent. We must continue to advance, lest we get left behind.”

In the past, the 17 cities of Meraldia had warred constantly among each other, leading to a period of stagnation and decay. It was because Meraldia had waned that the demon army was able to invade so easily. Had they chosen to resist, Meraldia would have been destroyed. The only reason Meraldia was a major power now was because the demon army was providing technological and military support.

More than anything though, it's Veight who helped bring Meraldia out of its slump. Airia felt a strange sense of pride well up within her when she thought about how the man she loved had saved her country. At the same time, she felt a little jealous. She wanted to have Veight all to herself, but because of how important a figure he was, that wasn't going to be possible. *That does feel a little sad, I suppose.* But she shook away that small spark of melancholy and smiled at her subjects.

“I hope today is a day that goes down in history. I want to lead you all to a better future, but to do that I need your help as well. As your new Demon Lord, I am counting on each and every one of you to keep me in line.”

As Airia wrapped up her speech, the audience broke out in applause.

“Long live the Demon Lord!”

“Glory to Meraldia!”

“We love you, Lady Airia!”

Humans and demons, Meraldians and foreigners alike congratulated Airia. The citizens looked far happier than they ever had under the Senate's oppressive rule. Airia teared up a little at the sight. She brought a finger to her eyes and wiped the tears away. She then turned back to Veight, the vice-commander who had transformed her life, and Meraldia's future. The kind

werewolf she would soon be marrying was applauding her with a gentle smile on his face.

I'm glad I chose to become a Demon Lord. Feeling happier than ever, Airia turned back to the people and waved.

And thus, the era of the first human Demon Lord began. There was still a lot that needed to be done, but for the moment, our highest priority was to help Woroy build his city. Airia's first edict as Demon Lord was to order the demon army's military engineers to head to the Fetid Wastes and assist the prince. With the help of the demon army's giants—who were exceptionally suited to heavy labor—and dragonkin engineers, the construction work moved forward at a rapid pace.

Meanwhile, I headed north to Krauhen. Prince Ashley, Rolmund's newly minted ambassador to Meraldia, would be arriving there soon. Though he hadn't committed any cardinal sins during his short stint as emperor, it would be awkward if he remained in Rolmund's capital while Eleora solidified her power base. As a result, he had been appointed ambassador to Meraldia. Ashley himself was eager to do the job, so he didn't mind the appointment one bit. For my part, I was glad to be working with an ambassador I knew personally.

"Lord Veight, it has been far too long!" Ashley exclaimed with a handsome smile the moment he exited his carriage. He hurried over to me and we exchanged a handshake.

"I'm glad you're doing well, Ashley. Meraldia is blessed to be able to rely on the wisdom of a man of your caliber."

I wasn't trying to flatter him. I honestly believed Ashley's knowledge of medicine and agriculture would be a huge boon to Meraldia. Moreover, he'd brought with him a number of nobles who wished to start life anew in our part of the world. The fierce fighting between Ashley's faction, the Doneiks faction, and Eleora's faction had caused a lot of nobles to lose their standing in the royal court. Everyone in the Doneiks family who was in the line of succession had either been killed or exiled, so the nobles that had supported them were left with no one to prop up. Most had reluctantly joined Eleora's faction, but a few

still harbored resentment against the new empress—Rolmundians never forgot their grudges, after all.

In order to prevent internal strife, Eleora had volunteered to buy up the lands of these nobles and allow them to immigrate to Meraldia. Most had jumped at the opportunity since they knew their last remaining liege, Woroy, was here. These stiff, formally dressed nobles looked out of place in Krauhen, but I knew their expertise would come in handy.

“I hear the noble population in Rolmund has grown out of control, so I imagine Her Majesty Eleora was glad to send some of her subjects to us.” Belken, Krauhen’s viceroy, said cordially as he walked up to me.

I’m surprised you’re not mad at her, considering what she did to you guys during the invasion. Belken was a surprisingly forgiving guy. Nodding, I replied, “It works out in our favor as well. We were able to receive an influx of highly educated citizens.”

All of these nobles should have received a comprehensive education in literacy, mathematics, tactics, economics, and history. Meraldia’s education system was still in the dark ages, so they’d be able to help bring it up to speed. Plus, they could do a good job as bureaucrats, or military officers. I chuckled to myself, and beside me, Forne did the same. *I know exactly what you’re thinking, and it’s not gonna happen.*

“Forne, in case you’ve forgotten, let me remind you that all of these nobles wish to live in *northern* Meraldia.”

“I know, I know. Worry not. I simply came here to greet them as the council’s representative.”

Yeah, right. I can tell from your scent that you’re lying.

“If you’re just here in an official capacity, why did you bring so many aides with you?”

He’d brought 20 or so of his administrators, which was effectively the top brass of his government. There was no way he was here for just pleasantries.

“You’re here to headhunt as many of them as you can, aren’t you?”

“I suppose I can’t fool you.”

Don’t blame me if the northern viceroys get mad at you.

Forne turned to one of his aides and whispered, “Baron Leran is one of Rolmund’s foremost composers. Do everything in your power to convince him to come to Veira.”

“As you command, sir. We’ve brought our best orchestra to impress him.”

You’re not even trying to hide what you’re doing, huh?

“Be sure to recruit Viscount Kshenka as well. The viscount himself isn’t worthy of note, but his eldest son, Lord Nolin, is a painting virtuoso. He has brought many of his school friends as well, try and convince them to come too, if possible.”

“We have heard that Lord Nolin has a particular fondness for women, so we’ve brought Veira’s top models to help lure him in.”

I’m starting to feel sorry for these nobles. I put Forne’s scheming out of my thoughts and turned to Woroy, who’d just arrived.

“Ashley! It’s great to see you again!”

“Woroy! That’s quite the tan you have there.”

Though Woroy and Ashley had been on opposing sides of Rolmund’s political struggle, the cousins were actually rather close. They exchanged a firm handshake and patted each other on the back.

“Ashley, you came at the perfect time. I need your help organizing my city’s fields. You love agriculture, don’t you?”

“Woroy, you do know I’m here as an ambassador, right?” Ashley gave Woroy a stern frown, but it was obvious from his tone that he was happy with the invitation. He was a horticulturist at heart, not a politician.

Once the formalities were out of the way, Ashley joined Belken for a meeting. Since we were in his city, it was only proper that Ashley speak with him first. While the two of them were discussing business, Woroy, Forne, and I chatted over tea. Thankfully, Forne at least had the manners to ask Woroy for

permission to scout some of the nobles that once belonged to his faction. As expected, Woroy agreed without complaint. Once that was out of the way, he spread the blueprints for his city out on the table.

“There’s something I noticed on my tour of Meraldia’s cities. There’s a problem with your walls. They help protect against invasions and give the residents a sense of safety, but they get in the way of expansion. When a city’s population grows too large, you’re forced to create a new one rather than build upon the current one.”

“Yeah, I noticed Rolmund’s capital had two sets of walls.”

Ryunheit was the same way now, since I’d had another wall built to protect the new districts.

“Come to think of it, Veira has two sets of walls as well,” I muttered. Forne turned to me and shook his head.

“The wall on the outer edge of the city isn’t meant for protection. It’s a mural, a work of art.”

“But with how tall and thick it is, surely it can function as a defensive structure as well?”

It was true that Veira’s outer wall had a bunch of engravings and paintings plastered across its surface. Together, they wove a history of Meraldia. Of course, it was a glorified history, designed more to impress than to educate.

Forne shrugged his shoulders as he took a sip of his tea. “The Senate said it was fine for us to build it.”

“Did they also say it was fine for you to build that fortress outside the city?”

“It’s not a fortress, it’s a performance hall.”

This skirting of the rules was hardly something that had started with Forne’s generation. Veira had a long history of using its wealth and connections to bend the Senate to its will. Woroy coughed loudly to grab our attention.

“*Ahem.* Getting back on topic...”

“Yeah?”

“The problem with your cities’ walls is how they’re made. I learned from the skeleton attack the other day that you don’t need one big wall circling the whole city. In fact, I won’t have one for mine. That’ll make it easier to expand, too.” Woroy pointed to the center of his blueprints where there was a large circle. “Instead, I’m planning on having a big arena in the center of the city, with sturdy walls to protect it.”

I see.

“It’ll be large enough to fit the city’s population in case of an enemy attack. But normally, I plan to use it to host regular tournaments and fairs and the like.”

“An arena sounds like a splendid idea,” Forne said with a nod. “Amusement centers like these go a long way to keeping your citizens happy, and the residents of the north prefer watching tournaments to watching plays.”

“Yeah, I noticed that while I was visiting the northern cities.”

It would have been hard not to notice, considering you won the championship of every tournament in every city during your tour.

Woroy folded his arms and frowned slightly. “There’s one problem, though. No matter how many safety measures you put in place, you’ll inevitably have a few casualties each tournament, and there are far more people who suffer serious injuries and need to retire forever from jousting and dueling. I don’t want to lose our best warriors to tournaments that are meant to be for sport.”

“I get what you mean...but you need a place for the hot-blooded warriors of your city to show off or else they’ll vent their energy in less productive ways.”

“Yeah, I know. It’ll be good training for the soldiers too. But still...” Woroy nodded reluctantly, still unsure of the idea.

Despite appearances, he was a cautious, thoughtful man. *You need a way to train your soldiers that also provides entertainment for the regular folk. Wait, I’ve got an idea.* In a half-joking tone I said, “In that case, rather than holding fighting tournaments, why don’t you have them compete at sports?”

“Sports? Ah, I saw that in Wa they have a ball game called Kemari, but it struck me as too refined and elegant for someone who wants to see combat in an arena. It’s a noble’s sport, isn’t it?”

Meraldia and Rolmund didn't have any popular ball games played by everyone. Rolmund especially, since the slack season for farmers was in winter, and Rolmund was covered in snow then. I shook my head and said, "I don't mean something like Kemari. There's another sport where two teams physically fight for control of a ball. It's made of leather, and it doesn't even really have to be round."

"If it doesn't have to be round, can you even call it a ball game?"

"Sure. If anything, it's better if the ball isn't round. That way it's harder to predict where it'll go when it hits the ground, making the matches more tense." I was thinking of introducing something like rugby or American football to Meraldia. "You're allowed to tackle each other to steal the ball from the other team. But in order to keep people from getting hurt, all the players will wear helmets and shoulder pads. The point of the game is to take the ball and run it past the enemy's defenses into the goal. Sounds like the kind of hot-blooded excitement the spectators want, right?"

"Hmm... Yeah, it does." Woroy's eyes sparkled as he envisioned what a match would look like. "Warriors clad in heavy armor charging through enemy lines to reach a goal. This works perfectly as a training exercise too. It'll make soldiers better at close-quarters combat, as well as group maneuvers."

Forne nodded in agreement. "Plus, it would be easy to add ornamentation to the helmets and shoulder pads. We could design different styles of armor for the different teams."

These two were smart enough that they could figure everything out from my sloppy explanation.

"In that case, it might not be a bad idea for Veira to invest in a team. They could market the city's wares to the spectators."

I can't believe you're thinking of doing sponsorship deals already. Seeing as I'd caught their interest, I continued my explanation, "Honestly, you could even use something like a leather bag, a barrel, or something similar for the ball. It just needs to be light and easy to carry."

"Yeah, that makes it a lot easier to set up than a jousting tournament. And, if it's easy to get a game going, that means regular civilians might pick it up too."

Woroy nodded in satisfaction. “You’re amazing Veight. Not only are you a master of politics and tactics, but you know how to win over the hearts of the people too!”

“Uhh, I really didn’t do all that much...”

If you wanna thank someone, thank the guy who invented rugby.

Excited, Forne added, “Every generation needs heroes to idolize, but in times of peace, it’s better for sports heroes to take the spotlight than military ones. The best part is, I’ll be able to make plays chronicling their exploits!” His expression suddenly grew serious, and he muttered, “Culture is like religion. You can use it to bring people together and motivate them towards a common goal. If we can get the people enthusiastic about sports, they’ll be easier to control.”

You sound like a third-rate villain, you know that? Grinning, Woroy and Forne shared a look.

“See what I mean, Forne? This man’s full of surprises.”

“Indeed, he’s a bottomless wellspring of fresh, new ideas.”

Guys, none of these ideas are mine, I’m just ripping off the people who came before me. It felt weird to be praised for achievements that weren’t mine.

Forne got to his feet and said, “You’ll be able to market your city this way too, Woroy. Everyone will want to visit to see what this brand new sport is like. If you play your cards right, finding new residents will be easy.”

“Can I count on you to help me sell this sport to the rest of Meraldia, Forne?”

“Of course. First, we need to set down some concrete rules. Let’s gather a contingent of experts to hash those out. We’ll also need a group of knights, armorsmiths, and carpenters to design the helmets and shoulder pads.”

“I’ll leave both of those things to you. Meanwhile, I’ll try and train some of my soldiers into a proper team for this sport.”

Looks like sports stars are about to become the heroes of this age. Honestly, I’m looking forward to it. Suddenly Woroy furrowed his brow and turned to me.

“By the way, we still need to give this sport a name, Veight. Since you’re the

one who came up with it, why don't we call it Black Werewolf Ball?"

"Absolutely not." I didn't want anything named after me; that name sounded awful, and I wasn't even a sports fan anyway.

Looking mildly disappointed, Woroy sighed, "Very well. Since this is a sport that emulates war, how about we call it Battleball? Is that acceptable?"

"Yeah, that sounds good," I replied with a nod.

Days later, a Meraldian Battleball Committee was formed, and I was added as an honorary member, even though I kept telling everyone I didn't want to be involved.

"Oh yes, that reminds me. I still need to speak with someone," Forne muttered, excusing himself from our tea party. That left just me and Woroy.

"I'm surprised you get along with Forne so well."

Woroy smiled and replied, "He's the one taking care of Ryuunie right now. And he's going to great lengths to find the best tutors he can for the kid. I know he acts shady sometimes, but Forne is a good man."

"Oh, I know."

Forne had written multiple books on economics, politics, theatre, and art. Just last year, he'd published a book titled *Kings and Plays*, which was about how rulers needed to provide their subjects with ample entertainment to keep them from growing seditious. His arguments were insightful enough that the book wouldn't look out of place in a university library back on Earth. I had no doubt it would leave its mark on Meraldia's history.

Woroy nodded thoughtfully and said, "I'm glad Ryuunie has someone like him to look after his education. He deserves as good an upbringing as possible."

Ryuunie was the sole heir of the Doneiks family, and many of the nobles who'd come with Ashley had high hopes for him. But I suspected that wasn't the real reason Woroy was doing all this for Ryuunie. Quietly, I asked, "Do you feel like you owe it to Ivan?"

"Partially. I owe it to my dad, too. But that's not the main reason." Scratching

his head awkwardly, Woroy suddenly changed the topic. “You and Airia are lovers now, right?”

“Hm? Oh, yeah.”

It wasn’t as if anything had really changed, but spending time with Airia was a lot more fun now. Being with her was relaxing.

“I can tell by that look on your face that you’re really smitten with her.” He sighed sadly to himself. “Since you understand what love does to a man, I’ll tell you. The real reason I’m doing all of this for Ryuunie is because of his mother.”

“You mean your sister-in-law?”

What’s so strange about that? Frowning, Woroy folded his arms and declared, “I was in love with her. Long before she married my brother, I’d been head over heels for her.”

“Ahhhh.” *So even a guy like you can fall in love.*

“The Doneiks family needed a political marriage with the Bolshevik family, so we all knew from the start that my sister-in-law would be marrying one of us. It just so happened that I wasn’t the one chosen.”

“I see.”

So the whole time, you were in love with Ivan’s wife.

“It’d be a lie if I said I wasn’t jealous of Ivan, but he was a good husband, a good father, and a good brother. I couldn’t hate him even if I wanted to.” Woroy let out a long sigh. “You’re the first person I’ve ever told this to. I would never have been able to tell anyone in Rolmund.”

“Is it really something you needed to keep secret? It’s not like you fell in love with your sister-in-law, it just so happens the woman you loved *became* your sister-in-law. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

Woroy frowned and replied, “It’s not that simple. It’s a huge taboo to lust after the heir’s wife in Rolmund. If word got out, the Doneiks family’s honor would be besmirched.”

“Really?”

Woroy cast his gaze out the window, a distant look in his eyes. “Ryuunie is the only child the woman I loved left behind. I need to protect him. And I want him to grow up into a great man who leaves his name in history.”

“I take it that’s how you’ve made your peace with your feelings?”

“Yeah, pretty much.” Woroy grinned, and there wasn’t a trace of resentment in his expression.

You really are an amazing guy, you know that? I’m glad I didn’t have to kill you. Though, there was one thing on my mind. “Have you ever thought about finding someone else? Or are you planning on staying a bachelor forever?”

“Honestly, I don’t have any time for romance right now. But once I’ve finished building my city, I’m planning on finding the second most beautiful woman in Meraldia and marrying her.”

“Why not aim for the most beautiful?”

“Come now, I’d never try to steal Airia from you. Second is good enough for me,” Woroy replied with a smile.

Are you saying Airia’s the most beautiful woman in Meraldia? Because you’re absolutely right. It was then that Forne returned.

“He seemed rather confident in his skills, so I imagine he’ll make a good tutor for Ryuunie. I do— Oh? What’s with the strange expressions? Did something happen?”

Oh, we were just talking about love. Shrugging, Woroy replied, “Ah, we were just bonding over being fellow bachelors. Speaking of which, Forne, you’re married, aren’t you?”

“Hm? Yes, I am.”

Not only was Forne married, but he’d just recently had his first kid. From what I heard, he treasured his family immensely and made time for them no matter how busy his schedule was. He didn’t really look like a family man, so Woroy was understandably surprised by his response.

“I’m not going to lie, I didn’t expect that.”

“Oh, is that an insult?” Forne smiled, though his tone grew serious. “I may

dress in a flamboyant manner, but I assure you I am quite the traditionalist, Woroy. I have a lovely wife and an adorable son.”

Forne had extensive theatrical training so when he wanted to, he could sound incredibly cool, like just now. I turned to Woroy and explained, “Forne’s wife is rather shy so she doesn’t appear in public much, but she’s the one who oversees all of Veira’s artists and performers.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“She’s a talented artist herself, too. Honestly, her beauty and brains are wasted on a guy like Forne.”

“Oh, stop it, you’re making me want to brag about her. Just so you know, once I get going, I won’t stop for hours.”

Forne smiled to try and hide his embarrassment. He was the most devoted husband I knew, so I didn’t doubt that he could gush about his wife forever. After a few seconds, Forne cocked his head and asked, “Speaking of which, when will you be holding your wedding, Veight?”

“Err, well... I still haven’t mentally prepared myself for it, so...”

I had no intention of toying with Airia’s feelings, so I knew we’d be getting married eventually when we got together. The problem was, I had no idea what to expect from marriage, and I had no one I could go to for advice. Forne’s expression grew stern and he sidled closer to me.

“Well, you better do it soon. It’d be different if you weren’t sure she was the one, but it’s not good to keep her waiting for no reason.”

“He’s right, you know. Love is war. Speed is essential if you want to secure victory,” Woroy chimed in.

Great, now Woroy’s getting on my case too. Sweating, I explained, “But I’m a commoner, and a demon at that. I don’t even know if I can have kids with Airia.”

As far as I knew, there had never been a union between werewolf and human, nor were there any cases of a werewolf getting a human pregnant, or vice versa. Airia was the head of the Aindorf family, and she probably wanted to

continue the family line, so I was hesitant to bring up the topic of marriage.

Forne gave me a troubled smile and said, "I should have known a straight-laced guy like you would be worried about something so trivial. What matters most here is how Lady Airia feels, isn't it? Marriage isn't something you decide unilaterally. Have you asked her what she thinks of getting married?"

"Not yet..." I wanted to sort out my feelings first, but Forne was right. I couldn't just keep dragging this out. "I will, first thing when I get home."

"Good, that's the spirit." Forne smiled gently at me.

Some time later, Kite and Lacy walked past our table. The two of them seemed to be arguing about something.

"That's why I said to give all your reports to me!"

"But you'll be showing them to Veight anyway, won't you? What does it matter if I give them to him instead?"

"Do you have any idea how much work he does already!? The reason I want you to give them to me first is so I can organize everything. That way I can cut his workload down into something manageable."

Thank god my vice-commander's such a competent guy.

Lacy nodded as Kite explained his reasoning to her. "I see, so that's why you keep insisting everything goes through you. You're amazing, Kite, you know that? You were famous even when I was at the Senate, but I never knew you were this good at your job."

"Err, well...epoch magic is useful for processing documents so it's not like I'm special or anything..."

Kite blushed and sped up his gait. Smiling, Lacy followed close behind him. Shrugging, Forne mused, "Meraldia's bleak winter has finally passed, and a passionate spring has come for all."

"People certainly are hooking up more now that we're at peace," I replied.

"Veight, you should at least get married before those two do."

“I’ll try.”

My meeting with Ashley and the nobles he’d brought with him was pretty uneventful. I avoided getting involved in the discussion about where the nobles would live, since I didn’t want to deal with the arguments I knew would happen. There were already too many people who wanted the nobles for their own city.

While the others were talking, Kite leaned close and whispered, “If you think about it, aren’t the nobles who turned their backs on Rolmund kind of like the northern viceroys? They both got burned by Eleora.”

“I can see the similarities, yeah.”

Of course they had different cultures and governing policies than the viceroys, but mediating between them wouldn’t be too hard, especially since Woroy and Ashley were here to smooth things over.

On the day of my departure, I went to pay a visit to Ashley.

“How do you plan on spending your time in Meraldia, Ashley?”

“Well...” After thinking about it for a few seconds, Ashley smiled. “I think I’ll learn everything I can about Meraldia’s agriculture and medicine. If I can analyze the differences between our two nations’ techniques and philosophies, I’m sure I can learn new things that will benefit Rolmund and Meraldia.”

“Do you still feel loyal to your home country?”

“Of course. After all, I served as its emperor for a time,” he replied with a smile.

I don’t think you have any supporters left in the empire now, though. There were a few hardcore Ashley supporters among his faction, but most of those had come to Meraldia. The fact that he loved his homeland despite that proved just how kindhearted Ashley was. Honestly, he might have grown to become a great emperor. *We really lucked out getting him as our ambassador. He’ll be a huge help to Meraldia.*

Looking as though he’d just remembered something, Ashley called for one of his attendants, “Please bring me that package. I can’t believe I forgot about it

until just now.”

What package? The attendant hurried off and returned with a small sack full of what appeared to be grain. Smiling, Ashley said, “This is the buckwheat you were so curious about, Veight. It’s from this year’s harvest.”

“Ohhh. Thanks, Ashley. You have no idea how helpful this is.”

Yes! Finally! Smiling, Ashley started waxing poetic about the properties of buckwheat.

“It’s been cultivated in the mountainous regions of Rolmund for centuries, but it’s never been too popular. Though it can grow in almost any conditions, its yield is poor. As you mentioned before, the darker variations of the grain aren’t very tasty, either. Because it can grow in places with little sunlight, the Sonnenlicht Order has claimed it’s a plant that doesn’t respect the sun. As a result, most people eschew it.”

“I see.”

Oh god, this lecture is gonna go on for a while, isn’t it?

“When Saint Grocaff died from eating buckwheat porridge, the Order banned its cultivation everywhere, claiming it was an evil plant.”

That guy probably just had a buckwheat allergy.

“But because it can grow in all conditions, there were a few remote regions that still cultivated it in secret. Whenever priests or bishops came, they would claim the plants just happened to be growing in the wild.”

Thanks for the info, but I wanna hurry back and start growing some myself. I needed to show you guys there were way better ways of cooking this than turning it into porridge. Just then, Woroy called out to Ashley.

“Ashley, it’s time to go!”

He had a contingent of knights waiting behind him. They were all nobles who’d served as Woroy’s cavalry officers in the past. Jovtzia Bolshevik was with them too.

“You can mess with the plants all you want in my new city, so get moving! Didn’t you say you wanted to take some soil samples before winter came?”

“Yes, yes. I’m looking forward to investigating Meraldia’s soil composition. By comparing the compatibility of different soil types with different plants, I’ll be able to...”

Once he started talking about agriculture, he went on forever. For a noble, he was a pretty strange man, but I liked him. I left Ashley to his musings and turned to Woroy.

“I’m expecting great things from your city.”

“Don’t worry, you can count on me, Veight. But you know, it’s pretty strange.”

“What is?”

Woroy gave me a bemused smile. “As the second son of the Doneiks family, I figured I’d spend my whole life helping my brother, and then Ryuunie after him. But now I’m going to be the first viceroy of a new city. I’m basically going to be a mini-emperor.”

He seemed happy about the prospect. *You’re gonna be the first emperor, or even viceroy, to live in an arena though.* Woroy held his hand out for a handshake.

“Good luck with everything, Astral Fencer.”

“Please don’t call me by that name.”

Smiling wryly, I shook his hand.

—Woroy, Master Pioneer—

An unfamiliar wind blew past my face as I watched Veight leave. *My life sure has taken an interesting turn.* Though I’d been born to the Rolmund imperial family, I was only the emperor’s nephew. There was little chance that I would ever inherit the throne. The Doneiks family was second in line for the throne, and I was second in line for inheriting the family name. Honestly, I’d never even considered becoming emperor, but my father and brother had thought differently.

“Woroy, you have the charisma Ivan lacks. A natural-born leader like you is fit to be emperor,” is what my father used to tell me.

“I know it’s strange for me to say this since I’m the eldest son, but I think you have what it takes to lead the Doneiks family—no, all of Rolmund even. All men of the Doneiks family are fit to rule, and I truly believe you’re the greatest man among us,” is what my brother once said.

But I didn’t want them placing their hopes on me. I was much happier being the guy who stayed back and helped my brother and father from the shadows. However, it was precisely because of that mindset that I let my brother marry the woman I loved. When I first laid eyes on her, I thought a Littwarski painting had come to life, or someone had shaped Remhein’s symphony into human form. She was truly that beautiful. I was so young then that I had no idea how to approach her. Every time I saw her, an indescribable fear would grip my chest, and I’d stammer over my words.

Later, I came to realize what I felt then was love, but I was just a 13-year-old brat who spent all his free time training with the sword. I had no idea how to interact with older women. In fact, I still don’t. Eventually, I learned the reason she kept visiting our manor was because she wanted to propose to my brother. Naturally, I was disappointed, but in the end, I was able to give both of them my heartfelt blessing, because I believed a worthless second son like me would never be able to make her happy.

After becoming the head of the Doneiks family and the viceroy of a new Meraldian city, though, there was something I came to understand. Back then, I’d just been making excuses for myself. The truth was, I had just been afraid. Afraid of claiming I could make the woman I loved happy, then failing to live up to that promise. She was like a goddess to me, and I thought that if someone as unworthy as me got close to her, I’d simply bring her misfortune. So I let my brother take her, and pretended I was okay with it. The same way I had deferred to my brother in everything else in life.

Unsurprisingly, my brother was the perfect husband. He made her happy, and he was a good father to Ryuunie too. Though I still had some lingering regrets, I was able to make my peace with being a part of her family, rather than her husband. Thinking back on it now, both she and my brother protected me from having to take on any real responsibility for anything.

Now I’m the head of the Doneiks family and a viceroy. I even have a bunch of

social outcasts under my command. Moreover, I'm the only family member Ryuunie's got left. I need to become the kind of man Ivan and my dad believed I was, both for his sake and my own. Maybe once I've accomplished that, I can finally start looking for a wife...

Honestly, I wasn't really sure what marriage entailed, but Veight and Lady Airia looked quite happy together. Not only that, they were willing to share their burdens with each other. If that was what marriage was about, then I definitely wanted someone to share my life with too. Once again, I was reminded of just how much my horizons had expanded after meeting Veight.

"Oh, if it ain't the boss—err, I mean lord viceroy, sir!"

One of my soldiers came running up to me. He used to be a bandit, but now he was an honorable and valiant knight. I folded my arms and grinned at the scarred veteran.

"You can keep calling me 'boss' if you want."

"I can't do that, you're a fancy lord and all now. Anyway, boss, those surveyors or whatever finished making the blueprints for the east side. I dunno how to read so I figured I'd ask you to... Shit, I called you 'boss' again, didn't I?"

It was funny seeing such a battle-hardened warrior trip over his words.

"Seriously, it's fine, you can keep calling me 'boss.' I'll go take a look at the report, but you guys need to start learning how to read. You've gotta earn your pay now that you're knights."

He scratched his head awkwardly and replied, "Sorry, boss. It's just, I'm not that great at studying, and..."

"If you're having trouble, I'll teach you. Don't worry, I had a hard time learning how to read and write back when I was first learning too. I'm sure if I teach you the same way I eventually learned, you'll have it down in no time."

"I-I'm humbly appreciative of the—thanks, sir!"

"You don't have to worry about using formal speech around me, I don't care about that kind of stuff!"

I slapped him on the back, then threw an arm over his shoulder. *I need to*

become a better man for these guys' sake, too.

A few days after returning to Ryunheit, I finally got a chance to talk to Airia alone. I knocked on the door of her room and asked, "Airia, are you done with today's work?"

"Yes, thanks to my capable vice-commander I don't have much to do."

Oh yeah, I forgot I'm her subordinate now. Even though I'm the one who conquered this city... Airia never ceased to amaze me. As I walked into the room she gestured to the sofa with a smile, and I took a seat.

"Should I make us some tea?"

"Nah, that can wait. There's something I want to talk to you about."

She gave me a quizzical look. "Is it...something important?"

"Extremely." She sat down next to me and I cut right to the chase, "Airia...what exactly would happen to the Aindorf family if you didn't have any kids?"

She looked confused for a second, but then smiled and said, "I have a few cousins, so if I had no children, one of theirs would inherit the family name. I don't have to be the one to leave behind an heir."

"Really?"

Isn't this going a bit too smoothly?

"The Aindorf clan is more like one big trading company than a royal family. Merchants and politicians know they can trust anyone bearing the Aindorf name, and we take great care to make sure none of our family members do anything unscrupulous," Airia explained.

The Aindorf family was well-known in southern Meraldia, and most of Airia's relatives were influential members of merchant guilds, or the clergy. The common people knew all of the Aindorfs were well-educated, well-mannered, virtuous, and wealthy.

"Being the head of the Aindorf family doesn't afford you any special privileges. It just means you're responsible for mediating disputes among relatives. You don't have to be the eldest son of the previous head or anything

to inherit leadership.”

“I see.”

In other words, there would be no problems with her family if Airia didn’t have any kids. That was one problem solved.

“Do you want to have kids in the future?” I asked.

“Well, it would be nice to have five children or so.”

You want that many!?

“But I wouldn’t mind if I couldn’t have any. I already have a few nieces and nephews, so it’s not as though I’m lacking children in my life.”

Judging by her response, Airia had already figured out where I was going with this. *Time for the final question.*

“Are you okay with marrying a demon?”

“I am the *Demon* Lord, you know.”

Her smile was dazzling.

“You’re not scared of the fact that I have memories from my past life?”

“According to Lady Mitty’s divinations, I’m a reincarnation of my great-great-grandmother, so we’re basically the same.”

“Yeah, but I came from a completely different world.”

“Yes, and the technology of that world was quite fascinating. I imagine it will help Meraldia grow as well.”

Wow, nothing discourages her. She must have nerves of steel or something.

“I’m not charming like Forne or Garsh, you know. I don’t really get how women think, or what a good husband is supposed to be like. Plus my fashion sense is horrible and I’m a workaholic and...” I trailed off timidly.

“I know. But I like those sides of you.”

I didn’t think it was possible, but her smile grew even more radiant than before. *I don’t think I’ll ever be able to beat her in an argument.* Arguing any further would be pointless, so I decided to pull myself together and propose.

Defeated, I sucked in a huge breath and looked Airia in the eyes.

“This is the first time in either life that I’ve fallen in love. I love you, Airia.”

Airia watched me silently, waiting for my next words.

“Even when we were apart, thinking of you brought me solace. I want to stay by your side forever, and be your pillar of support.” Mustering my courage, I asked resolutely, “...Will you marry me?”

“Yes...gladly. I thought you’d never ask.”

Tears welled up in Airia’s eyes. I had no idea what I was supposed to do when a girl was crying. In fact I hadn’t seen anyone cry in this world yet, so I was at a total loss here.

“A-Airia?”

“I’m fine. It’s just...I’m so happy that I...”

Unsure of how to calm her down, I settled for holding Airia’s hand. She squeezed it so hard it hurt. For a while, the two of us just sat there holding hands, until eventually she looked up at me with glistening eyes. She cracked a genuine smile and said, “I’m not ever letting you go now.”

“O-Okay...”

It felt surprisingly nice to be sought after so badly. *I don’t know if I’ll be able to live up to your expectations, Airia, but I’ll do my best.*

Before long, the date for our wedding was set. Things moved so fast that I never even got an opportunity to visit home and tell my mom. Instead, I ended up sending her a hastily-penned letter and praying she got it. There were many people in both Wa and Rolmund who needed invitations, and I was busy getting them all sent out.

Finally, on an unassuming day in late fall, Airia and I were wed. I had wanted a more subdued wedding ceremony, but since it was the Demon Lord who was getting married, it ended up being ridiculously ostentatious. The bride was the main star of a wedding, so my desire for a simpler ceremony got overruled. Not only did we rent out the largest Sonnenlicht cathedral in Ryunheit, but we

ended up using the entire old district of the city for the reception. Honestly, I thought it was overkill. Tons of stalls were set up on every street, and the citizens were getting drunk off all the free alcohol the demon army had provided. There were eating contests and singing contests happening in every square, and it was more like a festival than a wedding. *How are you all so lively when we just had the harvest festival a few weeks ago?* Unfortunately, this celebration was being held in our honor, so I couldn't really complain.

"Veight," Airia called out from behind me. I turned around, my mood improving instantly. Just for today, she'd changed out of her usual men's wear and was wearing a pure white wedding dress. She'd also done up her hair for the occasion.

"Airia..."

"Umm, do I look strange? I'm not used to wearing dresses."

Her dress was studded with jewels and she was wearing diamond earrings, but I found her bashful smile far more dazzling than any gemstone.

"Not at all. You look lovely. In fact, I can say with confidence that you are the world's most beautiful woman. I never met anyone as pretty as you, even in my past life."

I knew I was biased, of course, but even an objective observer would have to admit she looked stunning.

"Seeing you in that dress is suddenly making me very nervous."

"Why's that?"

"Because now I'm worried I won't be able to make you happy." I couldn't help thinking, *Am I really good enough for Airia?*

Blushing, she gave me a soft smile and said, "As long as I'm with you, I'll be happy no matter what happens."

"That makes me feel a little bit better."

I had a lot to live up to, but I'd already decided I was going to do this. There was no backing down now. Airia's smile grew wider and she added, "That reminds me, you promised to do any one thing I asked, right?"

“Oh, yeah.”

I’d failed to keep my promise to return before the summer solstice, so I’d promised Airia I’d do any one thing she asked of me. She still hadn’t redeemed that promise, but it seemed she was going to now.

“Would it be alright if I used that one request now?”

“Hm? Sure.”

Is she going to ask me to make her happy or something? That’s usually how it goes in movies, right? But to my surprise, Airia’s request was a little different from what I was expecting.

“Let’s find happiness together.”

“Yeah, let’s.”

I was truly blessed to have such a wonderful wife.



As our conversation began to wrap up, Vanessa—my mom—walked over.

“Are you two done flirting?”

“Hm? What’s up, mom?”

My mom was surprisingly childish for her age. That being said, I still loved her. She always tried to handle things by herself, but she was extremely strong and reliable. It was for that reason that Fahn idolized her. *Now that I think about it, Fahn’s a lot like Mom, huh.*

“Err, mom, why are you wearing that dress?”

“This? It’s your wedding, I need to be wearing red.”

For werewolves, the color red symbolized blood. It represented a successful hunt, a triumphant victory, and a bountiful harvest of meat. We saw red as a celebratory color, so we often wore red flowers in our hair, or dyed our clothes red. Our village had been a poor one, so making red cloth had been pretty difficult, but werewolves symbolically wore red to formal occasions. I briefly explained all of that to Airia, then turned back to my mom. Because of how frequently werewolves morphed between forms, our aging worked differently from humans. Some werewolves aged faster than normal, while others seemed to look young forever. My mom was part of the latter camp. She was well past 40 now, but she didn’t look a day older than 20.

“Yeah, but I didn’t think you’d be wearing red from head to toe...”

“This is my only son’s wedding. No amount of red would be enough to express how happy I am!”

Mom lifted up the hem of her dress and did a little twirl. *The dress suits you, but don’t you think you’re a bit too pumped up for this wedding?* While I was trying to think of how to respond, Fahn and Monza walked over. They too were wearing red dresses. Fahn’s dress was a deep scarlet, while Monza’s was light red, almost pink. They both had red flowers in their hair too.

“Thank god... I was worried your suit would be a disaster, but it looks like you dressed up properly for once,” Fahn commented as she looked over my attire.

“Wow, you look really cute in that dress Airia—err, I mean Your Highness!”

Mom ran over to the two of them, her arms spread wide. They weren't able to escape from her hug, and ended up getting their cheeks nuzzled. *Man, I haven't seen her do that since they were kids.* Because she'd pushed herself too hard when she was younger, Mom couldn't stay transformed for too long. But she was still faster than most werewolves, and stronger than half of my squad.

"You two both look gorgeous! Hurry up and find a better husband than my son, you hear?"

"Umm, I'm not sure there's any men out there better than Veight..." Fahn muttered awkwardly.

I glanced around the cathedral and saw that most of the guests had filed in. Every city's viceroy, all of the demon army's generals, and the leading figures from each religious organization were present. Fumino and Ashley were also here as representatives of Wa and Rolmund respectively. Woroy and Ryuunie had come too, and Airia's relatives and my werewolves were all here as well. Since this was the Demon Lord's wedding, plenty of influential people were attending.

I wasn't really fond of ceremonies where I was in the limelight. *The only time I want to be the center of attention is during my funeral.* In order to make things easier for me, I decided to pretend Airia was the sole star of the ceremony and focused on supporting her. Just then, Yuhit walked over with a smile. He was going to be officiating today's wedding.

"When I first came to Ryunheit, I never imagined I would be overseeing the Demon Lord's wedding. Though I did expect to be present for Lady Airia's wedding."

"Thank you for letting us use your cathedral, Father Yuhit," Airia said with a bow. I bowed as well, and Yuhit bowed back.

"I'm here today not as a bishop, but as your friend. So please, just call me Yuhit."

I smiled knowingly and said, "I see you're trying to show off the fact that the Sonnenlicht Order has connections with the Demon Lord and her Vice-Commander, *friend.*"

“I won’t deny that there are some who might perceive it that way,” Yuhit replied nonchalantly.

Truth be told, I did consider Yuhit a friend, but he was as much of a schemer as Mao. By officiating this wedding, Yuhit was cementing himself as the foremost Sonnenlicht bishop in Meraldia. That being said, no one else would have been fit to do the job. The Sonnenlicht Order was the most influential religion in Meraldia, and Airia was technically part of the Sonnenlicht church. Besides, the Mondstrahl Church—the next-largest religion in Meraldia—didn’t have any cathedrals large enough for an event this big. Most importantly, Mitty, the head of the Mondstrahl believers in Ryunheit, wasn’t interested in political maneuvering. I had tried to preserve equilibrium between the two religions by putting her in charge of the post-wedding feast, though. Weddings between nobles always got political, so I’d done my best to give everyone equal treatment.

Yuhit needed to make preparations at the altar, so he bowed again and excused himself. But just before he left he leaned close to me and muttered, “It’s strange. I never thought the day would come where a Sonnenlicht cathedral would be used for a wedding between a pagan and the Demon Lord, or that so many people of different religions and even demons would be present for it.”

Smiling, I replied, “Life is full of surprises, isn’t it?”

“Indeed it is. But that’s what makes it worth living.”

He bowed for a third time, then scurried off toward the altar. Fahn, Monza, and my mom all went to their seats as well. The Garney brothers were already drunk, and when my mom spotted them, they were given a stern scolding—by which I meant she threw them halfway across the main hall. Monza chased after them to punish them even further, and Jerrick hurriedly stepped in to stop her. I was amazed everyone could move so fluidly in the stiff formal clothes they were wearing. The citizens of Ryunheit were used to seeing scuffles between werewolves, so they didn’t mind, but the northern viceroys were shocked by how rowdy everyone was.

I turned back to Airia with a wan smile and said, “Things are going to be busy

for a while, huh?”

“It seems so. But we’re the two most important people in Meraldia, so that’s hardly surprising.”

“If we’re not careful, we’ll end up bringing misfortune to millions. We need to make sure we’re always using our authority for the good of the people.”

Yuhit, Ashley, Fumino, and all of the viceroys knew we wouldn’t give them preferential treatment, at least not the kind that would harm the integrity of this nation. But we both knew that wouldn’t stop them from trying to win us over anyway. We needed to be paragons of virtue, or corruption would begin to set in.

Airia smiled wanly back at me and replied, “You’re frowning again.”

“Really?”

“I know you have a strong sense of responsibility, but you need to learn to relax sometimes too. You’ve done a wonderful job so far, so you deserve to take time to think about your own happiness.”

“I get what you’re saying, but...”

I was still haunted by the regrets from my past life, which was probably why I pushed myself harder than I needed to. I felt like I was taking it a lot easier than I had before reincarnating, but the people of this world were even more easygoing, so I probably still looked like a workaholic to them.

Airia held a hand out to me and said with a bashful smile, “You promised to find happiness together with me, didn’t you?”

Yeah, I guess I did. And keeping my promises is another one of my responsibilities, so I guess I have to cut down on my workload now. Honestly, I was pretty happy already, but I was sure I would be even happier with Airia by my side.

“I’ll do everything in my power to fulfill that promise.”

I nodded, and took Airia’s hand.

—The Werewolves’ Drinking Party—

There was a big festival in Ryunheit to celebrate the Black Werewolf King Veight's wedding to the Demon Lord Airia. As the werewolves were still in a partying mood after the reception ended, they went over to the famous restaurant in the new residential district run by Beluza's marines.

"The Demon Lord looked really pretty in that dress!" Monza exclaimed as she munched on a fried potato. Jerrick, who was normally one of the most stoic werewolves, was weeping openly into his beer barrel.

"I'm so glad for you, boss! For the longest time I was so worried you'd never find a girl because of how straight-laced you are, but you did it!"

Fahn downed a full glass of rum and turned to Jerrick, her expression surprisingly sober.

"What about you, Jerrick? Isn't it about time you started worrying about your own love life?"

Monza dipped her potato in tomato sauce and muttered, "Didn't you know? Jerrick's dating Pia. You know, that one small-looking girl who... Wait, she's in your squad, Fahn! Hell, she's your partner, isn't she?"

"What!?" Fahn shouted, shocked. "Seriously? I had no idea. Pia never said a word about it, and neither did any of the other girls in my squad..."

Jerrick turned to Fahn and said flatly, "That's because they all knew there's no point in telling you."

"What's that supposed to mean!?"

"You're the girl who's famous for being more interested in fighting than boys. People call you Garneywoman behind your back, you know?"

"Wait, what!?" Fahn's expression stiffened up. Vodd took a swig from the bottle of fine wine he'd nabbed from Rolmund and turned to Fahn.

"Listen up, Fahn. If you spend all your days fighting, you'll end up like me." Though Vodd was a legendary fighter, he'd been a bachelor his whole life. "The stronger you get, the more you lust for blood. I had more than a few chances to find a wife and settle down, but I picked fighting every time. Now I'm an old man with no kids or grandkids. Well...it's not like I regret it though."

He poured Fahn an amber glass of wine, and the werewolves all inhaled its nostalgic fragrance. He poured out glasses for the other werewolves and even the Beluzan waiters before continuing his story.

“But unlike me, Veight’s both strong *and* kind. You let a perfect catch get away from you, Fahn.”

“Oh shut up! What would you know, you old man!?” Fahn pouted, looking like a child. In fairness, she basically was a child compared to Vodd. Monza shrugged, as if to say she wanted no part of this discussion, and turned to Jerrick.

“So how have things been with Pia lately? Good?”

“Yeah. She’s interested in smithing too, so we have a lot to talk about. Also, she doesn’t complain when I start talking about Veight. If anything, she likes talking about him too.”

“Oh, so you knew everyone else gets annoyed when you start praising him to high heaven. It’s not that we’ve got a problem with the boss or anything, you just drone on forever, you know. It’s kinda creepy, actually.”

“But I mean, look at him! Has there ever been a werewolf Champion as amazing as him!? He’s on a totally different level from the rest of us.”

“You’re not wrong there, but that doesn’t mean I wanna talk about him 24/7... Here, have some more to drink.” Monza smiled ruefully and handed Jerrick another tankard of beer.

Fahn downed another mug of high-proof rum and grumbled, “It’s not my fault, fighting’s just so much fun! Besides, I have to be strong, or one of you guys might end up dead. I don’t wanna see any of my precious family get hurt.”

Mary scooted closer to join the conversation and said with a smile, “My, you’re such a good girl, Fahn. But you know, love is kind of like hunting. If you get distracted, your prey’ll run away from you.”

Fahn turned to Mary with a pleading look in her eyes. “Do you have any experience with men, Mary?”

“Course I do.”

Mary shot Vodd a suggestive look. He took another swig from his bottle and muttered, “I still can’t believe Belje went and died like that. Didn’t he know he’d be leaving you behind? He was ten years younger than me too.”

“But it was thanks to him that our village survived. If it wasn’t for his sacrifice, I would never have gotten to see my daughter marry, or play with my grandkids.”

Fahn’s expression grew pensive. “It must have been tough when you guys were young. There was no one to heal people who got sick or injured, and you had to risk your lives on every hunt...”

Werewolves couldn’t stay transformed for too long, and in their human form they were no stronger than regular people. Sure, their sense of hearing and smell was still sharp, but that was all. Monza nodded and added, “If it wasn’t for the boss, I would have died years ago, too.”

“Yeah, I remember that. It was back when the lizards attacked, right? If it wasn’t for Veight, who knows how many of us would have lost our lives to that poison.”

Everyone nodded solemnly. Hamaam sipped his kefir, a drink he’d taken a liking to during his time as a nomad and said, “These days, we get to sleep in soft beds, eat as much meat as we want, and don’t have to worry about beasts attacking our homes. This is all thanks to our reliable vice-commander.”

“He even made it possible for us to live among humans,” Jerrick added with a smile. For a moment everyone went silent, but then they all smiled to each other.

“Our boss sure is one hell of a guy.”

“You said it.”

“He’s changed a little after becoming a vice-commander, but he was always a good kid. Smart, too.”

Jerrick downed his tankard in one big gulp and exclaimed, “And now he’s finally gotten himself a wife! We’ve gotta work even harder at our jobs, so he’s got time to spend with her!”

“Plus the harder we work now, the better our lives will be!”

Monza raised her mug for a toast. Everyone smiled and raised their glasses.

“A toast to our great vice-commander!”

“Hell yeah!”

“Cheers!”

“Drink up, everyone!”

The werewolves’ glasses clinked together, their respective drinks of choice glistening in the bright candlelight.

Upon marrying Airia, I adopted the Aindorf name. Werewolves had no surnames of their own, so it made sense that I would take Airia’s. Since I was a member of the Commonwealth Council, I had the same noble ranking as a viceroy. This meant I would also have a new middle name as well, like all the other viceroys.

“You want the name Von?” Airia exchanged glances with her aides. Everyone seemed confused by my choice. Eventually, Airia said, “You’re important enough that you could pick a more lofty middle name if you wanted.”

Most members of the Aindorf family picked from a set list of middle names when they became viceroy. The list included past members of the Aindorf family, Sonnenlicht saints, and famous historical figures from Ryunheit. Among that list, the name Von was the one that stuck out to me the most. One of the Aindorf family’s butlers skimmed over the list in my hands.

“My lord, Von is the name of one of the past heads of the Aindorf family, but...umm...” he hesitated, worried about coming off as rude.

Airia took over and explained, “His achievements are rather plain. He ruled Ryunheit before the Senate rose to power, and his main contributions to the city are expanding its sewers and standardizing our measurement system.”

Those sound like pretty important contributions to me. After conquering the city I’d had the canines upgrade the sewer system, but it had been pretty well-maintained before that.

“I think I like the name even more now. Henceforth, I shall be known as

Veight Von Aindorf.”

The butler gave Airia an exasperated look. But she just nodded, so he turned back to me and bowed. “Thank you for choosing a name from the Aindorf family. As servants of the house, we shall do our utmost to ensure your needs are met.”

“Thanks.”

He seemed to have misunderstood and thought that I’d picked this name out of consideration for Airia. Of course I had wanted to choose one of her ancestors’ names, but that wasn’t the real reason I’d picked this name. *It just sounds so cool. Veight Von Aindorf.* It sounded like a German noble’s name, and all German nobles had badass names. *I can’t wait to start signing reports as Veight Von Aindorf.* Maybe it was weird for a Japanese guy to get excited about German names, but I liked it. And so, my official title became Werewolf Veight Von Aindorf, Vice-Commander to Demon Lord Airia. *That reminds me, there’s one more important thing to take care of.*

I broached the topic with Airia while we had our afternoon tea.

“You mentioned this Lord Von guy standardized Ryunheit’s measurement system, right?”

“Yes. There used to be different scales for measuring the weight of grain, oil, and everything in between. Worse, different merchants used different scales for the same good, which led to a lot of confusion.”

Ryunheit was a city centered around trade, and all sorts of things passed through its walls. Each city in Meraldia had its own measurement system and its own non-standardized container sizes, so we often ran into issues where a shipment was smaller or larger than expected. Apparently, Lord Von had solved this problem in Ryunheit by mandating that every trader use the same scales, and having the merchant’s guild set the guidelines for them. That solved a lot of disputes, and it also helped facilitate trade within the city. During his reign, the city’s economy grew considerably, which contributed to making Ryunheit’s streets safer as well.

After hearing all that from Airia I said, “You may not realize it, but what Lord Von did is extremely important. Standardization was extremely important back

in my world, and Lord Von standardized the measurements Rynheit uses.”

Customs and culture tended to dictate the container sizes cities used as their baseline measurement standards, meaning each city had different standards. Hell, container sizes varied between merchants too, not just cities. Naturally this caused a lot of disputes between merchants. Indeed, if scales between two merchants varied too much, they’d have to recalculate prices to match the amount, which was both a hassle and wasted a lot of time. This world had writing and simple abaci, but they didn’t have calculators or spreadsheet programs, so remeasuring the quantity of someone’s goods and then recalculating the price to match wasn’t trivial.

“Having multiple measurement systems restricts trade, and that’s a huge loss for a city like Rynheit.”

Lord Von must have noticed that as well, which was why he mandated that everyone use the same measuring scales within Rynheit. That proved so valuable that a few other cities adopted Rynheit’s measurement standards as well.

“Thanks to his efforts, Rynheit’s scales are used in most of southern Meraldia’s cities now. Almost every merchant who trades in the south uses them as well,” Airia muttered.

“Do you see how important it is now?”

Popularizing one standard was beneficial to everyone, but it was especially beneficial to the city or country that popularized that standard.

“In my old world, there were often multiple standards that competed for supremacy. If the standard someone was pushing ended up abandoned, their company would take a big hit.”

“Uh-huh...”

I guess even someone as smart as Airia needs some time to wrap her head around the concept.

“The previous Demon Lord—actually, I guess he’d be the demon lord before last now—was a big proponent of standardization as well.”

Friedensrichter had realized how vital standardization was for the demon army. Any large organization needed systems like this in place. In order to modernize the demon army, standardization was all but required. That being said, there were only a few fields where standardization was helpful in a medieval-era world like this. Among them, only a few could be streamlined without modern technology.

“Lord Friedensrichter probably lived in a time of war during his past life. The country I belonged to participated in two great wars, and it lost the second of them.”

“That’s awful,” Airia muttered with a pained expression. I smiled and waved my hand dismissively.

“Don’t worry, we came back stronger than before. You saw that city in my mindscape, right? I was born a few decades after that war, and that’s what my country looks like now.” I paused briefly to take another sip of tea. “Anyway, the point is one of the biggest reasons we lost that war was because we didn’t standardize everything.”

Back during WWII, Japan’s army and navy used different octane fuel for their vehicles. Not only that, but they even used different caliber guns and cannons. There were probably other issues too, but that was all I learned in history class. Of course, even after the war, competing standards didn’t go away. There was the VHS versus Betamax era, and then the Blu-Ray versus HD-DVD era.

As I thought back to the digital format wars I explained, “Armies are complex organizations that need supply trains, training facilities, and so on. And those organizations need standardization to function smoothly. Take equipment for example. If you want to arm a large group, it’s easier if you have a standard set of equipment that you give everyone.”

“I see. It’s true that if you make everyone’s spears the same size, they’ll be more effective as a unit. Plus, that will make it easier for the blacksmiths to forge their weapons.”

I’d spent a lot of time thinking about the various improvements the organizations of this world needed. Standardization was, of course, one of them, but any other potential advancement needed to be something that could

both be easily slotted into currently existing systems, and work well with any new systems that arose. There was a lot of knowledge from my past life that wasn't really applicable to this world's societies. Besides, I wasn't a specialist in any of these fields, which was why I made sure to run all my ideas by Airia to make sure they'd actually help Meraldia out.

I also started complaining about my old life to her, since she knew everything now. It was nice to have someone I could talk to about Japan again. Ever since Friedensrichter had died, I hadn't had anyone I could confide in.

Speaking of standardization, there was one field that absolutely needed it in this world—magic. In fact, magic didn't even have units of measurement, let alone standardized units. That made talking about magic in specific terms almost impossible. Imagine trying to order a two-centimeter by four-centimeter plank of wood that weighed 500 grams, but without using the words centimeter or gram. Discussing magic was like that. There was no way the field could advance like this. Honestly, it amazed me the scholars of this world hadn't addressed the issue yet.

The next day, a flash of inspiration hit me as I was considering the magic problem. If there weren't any units of measurement, I could just make new ones. At the very least, it wouldn't be hard to make some set measurement for mana. A scale for mana would make it easier to compare mana capacity between mages, as well as hash out exactly how much mana certain weapons needed to function. Not only that, but it would make research and innovation easier too. Magic would go from being an art form to a science.

"So, Kite."

"Yeah?"

"I'm thinking of making your mana capacity the baseline unit for mana measurement. We'll name it Kite, after you."

"Wait a second!"

I figured Kite would be flustered, but honestly, he was the perfect benchmark.

"You can accurately gauge people's mana capacity with your epoch magic."

And your own mana capacity rarely fluctuates and is pretty close to average, so it makes for the perfect baseline.”

“You have a point, but...”

Most people’s mana levels fluctuate slightly, the same way their blood pressure and temperature did. But Kite’s was surprisingly stable. For all these reasons and more, he was the perfect candidate.

“Chances are, we’ll dig up more of the Old Dynasty’s artifacts in time. It’ll be a lot easier to write about their absurd mana capacity if we can use Kite’s as a standard of measurement.”

I wanted to thoroughly investigate the past to make sure we didn’t repeat the Old Dynasty’s mistakes. In their attempt to mass-produce Heroes, they brought their advanced society to ruin, leaving only a few artifacts behind. Accepting my argument, Kite finally relented.

“I guess you have a point. The Senators were all mor— I mean, ignorant about magic, so they didn’t care if our reports weren’t super accurate.”

“Exactly. But I want to turn the study of magic into a proper science, which means we need standardized units to quantify mana.” I looked Kite in the eyes and said, “That’s why I’m assigning you the task of defining how much exactly one Kite is. Become one of my Master’s disciples, and work with Ryucco to hash everything out.”

“You want me to study under the Demon Empress!?”

“Yeah, she’ll be able to assist you with your research. I’ll do what I can to help out, too. Getting an accurate measurement for mana is going to be a huge boon for the demon army.”

Kite’s findings would probably be as vital to the field of magic as Pythagoras’ discoveries were to mathematics. *And since I’m the one asking Kite to research this, I’ll get to leave my mark in the history of magical science as well.* Mwahahaha. This would be my way of making up for destroying two ancient magical artifacts.

Kite frowned as he mulled over my request. “But Veight, what about my usual duties?”

“Oh yeah. You’ll still be my vice-commander, but I’m relieving you of your duties as my assistant.”

“What!? No!”

You don’t like it? Too bad. Of course, I used a more diplomatic approach to persuade him.

“You’re meticulous and a hard worker, but you’re way too smart to waste your days being a mere secretary.”

“Huh? What?”

I grabbed Kite by the shoulders.

“You’re a genius who deserves to leave your name in history, Kite,” I declared with as much sincerity as I could muster.

“I am!?”

Absolutely. Kite’s eyes went as round as dinner plates and he sputtered, “B-But I *like* my job. Helping you is fun, and...”

“Believe me, I don’t want to lose you either. That’s why I kept putting this off.”

Not only was Kite a superb investigator, but he was a good manager as well. It was thanks to him that I wasn’t drowning in work despite having more responsibilities than ever. If possible, I wanted to keep him as my assistant forever, but it would be doing him a disservice to keep him as a mere assistant. He was wasting his talents doing odd jobs. That was something that had been bothering me ever since he decided to work for me. Kite seemed wholly unaware of his own abilities, so I decided to drive the point home.

“If someone as skilled as you dedicates your life to research, the discoveries you make will be the foundation mages use to advance the field for centuries to come. You’ll be bringing people happiness long after we’re all dead.”

I was confident he could be the Newton of the magic world. When the Black Plague struck his hometown, Newton retired to the countryside and devoted the rest of his life to research. *I think, anyway. I don’t actually remember his life all that well.* Regardless, the point was I needed to provide Kite a similar

environment. He needed to be freed from his responsibilities so he could focus his talents on innovation. It pained me to lose such a valuable assistant, but this was for the best. Of course, I knew he wouldn't take kindly to being reassigned, which was why I was still trying to convince him.

"There's so much about mana we don't know. If we want to unravel the mysteries of the world, we need a better understanding of what mana is. I want to start by at least quantifying its amounts."

Back in my old world, mana hadn't existed. Or if it had, it hadn't been discovered. Either way, the best method to advance the other sciences would be to pin down the true nature of mana and magic. We needed to apply the scientific method to mana and start experimenting with it.

"Having sensible units for mana measurement is the first step to understanding it. I'm a third-rate researcher, which is why I'm putting a pro like you in charge."

"You think I'm a pro!?"

"I do. Kite, I can't do this without your help. For the sake of the generations who'll follow after us, I need you to become another plain vice-commander, like me."

Kite had sharp insight and strong analytical skills, but more importantly, he stuck to his moral code and was diligent about his work. Above all, he was the greatest epoch mage I knew. It was as though he'd been born to be a researcher.

After a few long seconds of deliberation Kite finally said, "Alright, I'll do it. If you really think I'm that good, then I'll become just your vice-commander!"

"Thanks, man."

Kite gave me a bashful smile and said, "But you better not replace me now that I've stopped being your secretary."

"Don't worry, I won't."

I need to at least be able to handle my responsibilities by myself.

I gave Kite a team of researchers to work with, and together they formed the Magic Research Division of the demon army. While this was officially a demon army undertaking, I also solicited help from other humans not affiliated with the army.

“Before transforming, most werewolves have around 6 to 8 Kites of mana. Stronger werewolves like the Garney brothers have around 9 Kites,” Kite explained as he put the mana measuring gun he’d developed with Ryucco down on my table. The gun was basically a modified blast rifle, but instead of absorbing the user’s mana to fire a bullet, it absorbed the mana to measure it. “Humans tend to have around 0.8-1.2 Kites of mana. Of course, there are a few exceptions who’re way higher on the scale, but that’s the average.”

“In other words, you can immediately tell a human and a werewolf apart by measuring how much mana they have.”

That was likely the method Rolmund had used to test whether I was a demon or not. Fortunately, Kite and Lacy had managed to work together to fudge my numbers. *Now that I think about it, Lacy’s a pretty amazing mage too.* Werewolves normally stockpiled mana within their body and then used it up in one big burst when they transformed. That was the reason they were so much stronger than most humans—though, of course, there were humans who surpassed even that strength.

“So how many exceptions have you discovered so far?”

“Wengen, Ryunheit’s garrison commander, has 3 Kites of mana, and Beluza’s Grizz and Lord Woroy both have 4 Kites. Oh, and Ser Barnack has 7 Kites. Those are all the exceptions I’ve found so far.”

Everyone Kite mentioned was someone I’d had my eye on for a while now. There was no direct correlation between fighting strength and mana capacity, but anyone who could effectively use their mana could turn that capacity into increased strength. For example, they could reinforce their muscles, or make themselves more resistant to injury. As a strengthening magic user, I was well-acquainted with using mana to enhance physical ability. Moreover, people who had as much mana as a Hero could just fire that mana as-is to attack, like Arshes had. It wasn’t a very efficient use of mana, but when you had thousands more

than the average person, efficiency didn't matter.

Ryucco, who'd been making some minor adjustments to the mana measuring gun, turned around and gave me a thoughtful look. "Why're there so many tough humans out there? That old Barnack dude has as much power as a werewolf."

"Those four are exceptionally physically fit, it's true, but I think the reason they're that strong is because they're unconsciously using their mana to strengthen themselves. Every now and again, they pull off moves no human should be capable of."

They might not have formally studied strengthening magic, but they'd probably instinctively learned of some way to use their mana to power themselves up. Barnack was revered as the Sword Saint in Rolmund, but he only had 7 Kites of mana. On top of that, he wasn't a mage or a demon, so he didn't know how to efficiently convert that mana into strength either. Meanwhile, werewolves expended their mana as efficiently as possible when they transformed, so even someone as strong as Barnack wouldn't stand a chance against your average werewolf. *It becomes really obvious once you quantify everything and compare the numbers.*

"This is some really interesting stuff, guys. Even the famous Baltze only has 8 Kites of mana, so that's probably the upper limit for exceptions. Oh, but Firnir had 12 Kites, right? She's amazing alright."

"Yeah. It's even crazier because on average kentauros only have 1.3 Kites."

She probably unconsciously used her mana when she charged, which was what allowed her to reach those insane galloping speeds. Strong fighters like her could easily mow down regular soldiers in a battle, since they basically had 10 times the strength of normal men. However, they were still nothing compared to Heroes, who usually had anywhere from 100,000 to 1,000,000 Kites of mana. Before I absorbed all the mana in Ason's Legendary Treasure, I had around 10 Kites myself, but now I had about 1,000 Kites. Even with my enhanced mana, I wouldn't stand a chance against a real Hero. Because I'd studied strengthening magic, I could use my mana far more efficiently than the average person, but that didn't matter when the enemy was five to six orders of

magnitude above me.

“I guess that’s why nature keeps trying to make counterparts to Heroes every time they appear. It needs to balance out the mana disparity,” I muttered to myself.

Ryucco’s ears twitched and he said, “Is it kind of like how when you heat up ice it becomes water, but you can’t turn water back into ice and heat?”

“Yeah. I’m surprised you remembered that analogy.”

Some time back, I’d explained thermodynamic equilibrium to Master in as simple terms as I could. Ryucco had been there for that discussion, too. In short, nature always tried to maintain equilibrium. From what I could tell, mana wasn’t exempt from this. That was why every time a Hero came into existence, an anti-Hero, like a Demon Lord, appeared to destroy them. Master had pioneered that theory, and I’d just confirmed that it followed existing laws of nature.

Ryucco put down the mana measurement gun and grabbed a veggie stick out of his cigar case. He chewed on it thoughtfully and said, “But you know, everything really does look way simpler once you put it into numbers. Heroes are damn scary because they’re literally a million times stronger than regular people. If you got a group of ‘em together they’d probably be able to blow up the whole continent or something.”

“Exactly—which is why we need to take steps to ensure no more appear.”

Heroes were walking natural disasters. Now that humans and demons were working together, there was no need for any more of them. What society needed now were tools of creation, not destruction.

“It’s amazing how fast Ryuunie’s growth has been. He’s already a master of writing stories that move people’s hearts. Honestly, he would make for a wonderful playwright. He’s also quite skilled at debating.” Forne gushed to me about Ryuunie’s progress with his studies after one of our council meetings. He’d just finished his stint in Veira, and was now studying in Lotz, which had expanded to encompass all maritime pursuits, not just fishing.

Petore nodded approvingly and added, “He’s a sharp lad, that’s for sure. He says he wants to join the army, but he’d do great as a merchant too.”

“Really?”

“Mhmm. He’s good at arithmetic and all that of course, but ya should see him haggle. The fundamentals are important, but when it comes to making deals, ya need guts, and he’s got that in spades. He’s crafty too, and he knows how to plan ahead. I wish I could make him my successor.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you praise someone this much,” I replied with a smile.

Petore harrumphed and said, “Ya just don’t get it. He’s sharp, yeah, but he’s so much more than that. He’s curious about everything, and he’s honest to a fault. Brats like him go far in life.”

“Then maybe Ryuunie might be a good candidate for the next Demon Lord,” Airia said with a chuckle, and I nodded in agreement.

“If the Demon Empress was here, I’m sure she’d approve as well.”

After all, Master was the one who said it didn’t matter who became the Demon Lord, as long as they had the skills to do the job. Really, it’d be pretty interesting to make a Rolmund prince Meraldia’s Demon Lord. Naturally, Ryuunie would have to build up his popularity and prove he could be a good leader before he could seriously be considered a candidate for the position.

Petore folded his arms thoughtfully and mused, “But ya know, no matter how good the lad is, Ryuunie’s just one kid. We’re all working together to give him the best education possible, but we can’t do this for every kid. We need some kinda system to educate all of Meraldia’s youth.”

“Definitely.”

The council was pouring an inordinate amount of time and money into Ryuunie’s education. It made sense since he was former Rolmundian royalty, but it was definitely a bit much for one person.

“Come to think of it, how do all the other councilors raise their children?”

The viceroys exchanged glances.

“We hire private tutors for our children. We also look for promising youngsters among the citizens and provide them with opportunities to further their education.” Belken, Krauchen’s viceroy answered.

It was thanks to Belken’s public education program that Lacy was able to study magic as well. Most of the other viceroys explained that they scouted prominent generals and scholars and hired them as private tutors.

After hearing all their answers I suggested, “Why don’t we build a school? That way we can train up the next generation of councilors and bureaucrats and engineers.”

Melaine nodded in agreement. “That does sound like a sensible idea. Education is certainly important. It’s only thanks to Master’s tutelage that we are where we are today. Besides, we would win the people’s favor by constructing a school.”

“I know, right?” I replied with a grin.

“Most of the dragonkin engineers in the demon army are well-educated, as are all the mages who studied under Master. It won’t be hard to find skilled teachers to staff the school.”

There was one very important reason why we needed a school as soon as possible. The current generation of viceroys had been appointed by the Senate, so you could be sure they were reasonably competent at their job. I knew there were multiple candidates for viceroy of any city at any given time, so the Senate had likely picked the most qualified of the bunch. Meraldia was at peace now, which meant we had time to think about the next generation, and the future of the Commonwealth Council. Under the current system, the councilors would push for their relatives to inherit their position, which could easily lead to nepotism. If a councilor selected their son or daughter as an heir, it’d be hard for the others to object, even if that person wasn’t suited for leadership.

This problem could be mitigated slightly by creating a school to raise an entire generation of leaders to choose from. Plus, this was the perfect opportunity to get demons involved. If demon children started receiving the same education as human nobles, it’d be easier to bring the various races together. By getting kids used to each other’s differing appearances and values while they were still

young, it'd eliminate bias among future generations. Furthermore, it would mean the next generation of leaders would all consider coexistence a priority. *Mwahahahaha, my long-cherished desire is finally within reach.*

Petore and Garsh suddenly started whispering to each other.

"He's making that evil face again..."

"Don't worry, he may try to act like a villain, but the things he does always end up benefiting everyone."

Of course they do. I'm just a humble vice-commander. Since educating promising kids was in everyone's best interests, the councilors unanimously agreed to fund a school. As soon as I got approval, I started drawing up plans. In order to make things fair, I'd need an even number of human and demon teachers. They needed to be the very best too, since it was possible someone who studied there would end up a Demon Lord in the future.

Unsurprisingly, Master was extremely enthusiastic about building a new school as well.

"Well done, Veight. A robust education system is the foundation of a good nation. We must ensure this school can accommodate both humans and demons."

"I agree completely. Which is why I think you should be the school's principal, Master. Everyone in the council agrees too. What do you say?"

Master grinned like a giddy child. "Hehehe, I see you know your Master well. Nothing would make me happier than serving as principal."

"Oh no, I've still got a long way to go before I can say I really understand you," I replied. *Wait, what kinda response was that? That sounded so weird.*

And thus, the Demon Empress' University of Meraldia was born. The name was a mouthful, so I suspected it'd get abbreviated soon. Master used up so much of the demon army's budget on building the school that Kurtz nearly had a heart attack, and Baltze ended up lecturing her for an hour straight.

It was probably a bad idea to let a scholar handle the army's budget, huh? Of

course, I was a scholar myself, which was why I didn't stop her. In fact, I wanted Master to make the greatest university on the continent, so no amount of money was too much in my eyes. The more skilled academics and engineers we raised, the faster we'd be able to modernize.

Meraldia was technologically behind Rolmund and Wa, so we needed to catch up as fast as possible. It was important that both our own citizens and the citizens of other countries saw us as an advanced nation that valued knowledge and progress. Fortunately, Airia put a good chunk of her family's fortune into the school as well, so we were able to pay for the construction without bankrupting the demon army. *Thank god our current Demon Lord is rich.*

"Sorry for making you spend your money on this, Airia."

"I don't mind at all."

Airia and I looked absently up at the ceiling as we lay in our new bed. We'd been married for a few weeks now, but I was only just getting used to sleeping together.

After a brief silence, Airia muttered, "Now, even if we can't have children, we'll be able to raise someone to inherit your will."

"Airia..."

Judging by her tone, Airia was still worried about whether or not we could have kids. As her husband, I felt like I should say something, but I didn't know what. *Actually, maybe this is the kind of thing that you're supposed to express with actions instead of words. Alright, let's go with that!*

Nervous, I nevertheless moved closer to Airia and said with a smile, "It's too soon to give up, you know. Why don't we at least try having kids before deciding that it's impossible?"

I realized a second too late how suggestive that sounded, and blushed to the tips of my ears. Airia, too, blushed and said, "U-Umm...you have a point... W-We should at least try before..."

Man, she looks adorable when she's embarrassed. Gathering her courage, Airia scooted closer as well and stroked my chest. *I guess I did say the right thing here.* Smiling, I turned off the lamp.

It's been hours since our wedding, but I'm still too excited to sleep. I never imagined I could be this happy.

I glance out of our window while listening to Veight's steady breathing. Pale moonlight filters through the glass, faintly illuminating the room. When Veight first burst through my second-floor window, I never imagined the two of us would be sleeping together in that very same room. Fate works in mysterious ways, I suppose.

I think back to the time Veight entered my mindscape. He said that my heart was shaped like a two-story manor, with the first floor containing memories of my childhood and the second containing memories of my adult life. It's rather embarrassing to think about all the things he likely saw in my rooms. I remember he said the staircase leading up to the second floor had a mourning veil draped over it. When my father died, I was forced to climb the stairs to adulthood. His death was one of the biggest turning points in my life. That's probably why his death was the memory that encased the staircase, and why my adult life was contained on the second floor.

"I guess that means now a third floor is being added to my mansion..." I mutter softly to myself.

"Third floor?" Veight mumbles drowsily. *Oh no, did I wake you up? I'm sorry, Veight.*

"Sorry, I was just thinking about the mansion in my mindscape."

"Mind...scape?"

He looks like he's half-dreaming, so it's probably best to just let him go back to sleep.

"It's nothing. I'll tell you tomorrow. You can go back to sleep."

"Mmm... Good night..."

After a few seconds, his breathing becomes even again. He looks so peaceful in his sleep. It's hard to imagine he's the Black Werewolf King, the demon army's strongest general. Overcome by a sudden urge to tease him, I start

playing with his bangs.

“Mmm?”

He furrows his brow a little, but he doesn't wake up. I keep toying with his hair, but he doesn't stir again. He looks cute when he's asleep, but it's a shame his reactions are so dull. I snuggle closer and wrap my arms around him. His warmth calms my excitement, and suddenly I feel sleepy. I have no doubt in my mind that the third floor of my mansion is for him.

The Demon Lord and Her Vice-Commander's Honeymoon

"A honeymoon?" Airia asked quizzically as she handed me a sheaf of documents. I nodded as I started sorting through which had been signed and which hadn't.

"Yeah. In my old world, couples often went on a trip together right after getting married."

"I see..."

Until recently, the roads in Meraldia hadn't been very safe, so few people traveled for leisure. In fact, most commoners never left the city they lived in unless they were merchants, or on a pilgrimage. Wealthier people occasionally went on trips, but they made sure to hire an escort of guards. Since Airia was the Demon Lord, we likely wouldn't be allowed to travel all on our own, but I did want to go on a honeymoon of some kind.

"It's not a requirement or anything, of course. But you've been really busy these past few weeks, and at this rate, you're going to burn out." She went from getting her body hijacked, to becoming the new Demon Lord all in a short time span. "So I was thinking a nice vacation might help you relax. What do you say?"

Airia smiled sweetly and replied, "That sounds like a splendid idea. I've visited all of Meraldia's cities once before, but only for official business. It would be nice to spend some time seeing the sights."

Exactly.

"Besides, inspecting the nation's cities is part of the Demon Lord's dut—"

I held a finger up to Airia's lips to silence her.

"Didn't I just tell you you'll burn out if you keep working so hard? As your humble vice-commander, I am against taking any trips for business reasons."

This is supposed to be a vacation, remember?”

For a moment Airia looked surprised, but then she smiled again. “Well, if you insist, I suppose I can take a break. So where would you like to go?”

“I haven’t visited Veira yet, so why don’t we go there? It’s the city with the most tourist attractions, and Forne’s been nagging me about visiting him. Plus, it’ll be an opportunity to inspect one of the cities I...” I trailed off, noticing the look on Airia’s face.

“If I recall correctly, you just told me it’s bad to overwork yourself, my dear vice-commander.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.”

Airia knew me too well.

There was no time like the present, so we immediately started planning our trip to Veira. I made sure to remove all work from our schedule to ensure this stayed a vacation. Airia wanted to see the city’s historical landmarks and their most famous plays, as well as explore the shops in the artisan quarter. *I hope I have enough savings to pay for everything she wants...* My personal salary wasn’t that high, and I didn’t get paid for my work on the council.

For our guards, I ended up picking my closest friends from among the werewolf unit. Fahn, Monza, and Jerrick, along with their squads. It was only 12 people, but that many veteran werewolves could easily take on a force hundreds strong. Honestly, taking along this many was probably overkill, but I wanted to be absolutely certain Airia was safe.

“It feels kinda weird being guards, since boss is the demon army’s strongest general.”

“Airia— Err, I mean Her Highness is way stronger than us now too.”

“The reason Veight picked us is because we don’t complain about the way he does things. Our job isn’t really to protect the two of them, it’s to not get in their way.”

Thanks Fahn, I knew I could count on you. The point of this trip was to forget

about work, and let Airia enjoy herself.

“Look, Veight. This wine glass shines like a rainbow when you hold it up to the light!”

“Ah, that type of design is called faceted glass. In Rolmund, only the wealthiest nobles and members of the imperial family could afford it. The only place you’ll find it in Meraldia is here.”

Glassworking was a complex art, and glass art pieces fetched a high price. Airia asked the shopkeeper the price, then returned the glass to its stand with a thoughtful expression.

“It’s cheaper than I thought it would be. Glass like this would sell for a lot more back in Ryunheit. I should probably let our city’s merchant’s guild know how cheap it is here.”

“I think he’s just lowballing you because no one wants to rip off the Demon Lord...”

Airia had spent much of her childhood studying trade, so she frequently made comments like these, even though we weren’t supposed to be thinking about work.

In an attempt to get her mind off of her responsibilities, I took her to a play next, but that turned out to be a mistake.

“You can be really absent-minded sometimes, you know that?” Forne said with a sigh. We were watching the play together with him from his private booth.

“Did you forget that Veira was the birthplace of the *Black Werewolf King* play series?”

I did. Today’s play was a retelling of my journey to Wa. Like the others, this had been dramatized to hell and back. An extremely handsome man who was playing the role of me brandished his sword and shouted, “Nue, cease this wanton destruction! Us demons are different from monsters like you who kill indiscriminately!”

The orchestra played a strange, grating melody that was likely meant to imitate the Nue's roar. Every time it played, the Black Werewolf King dodged lithely to the side. But there was no actor playing the role of the Nue. Instead, there was a train of dancers draped in pale blue cloth surrounding the Black Werewolf King. From the looks of it, they were a depiction of the Nue's lightning attacks.

"I take it the reason you don't have anyone playing the Nue is to stimulate the viewers' imaginations?"

"Correct. A costume wouldn't look nearly intimidating enough."

"You really are a genius when it comes to theater. By keeping its form hidden, the spectators will imagine the scariest possible creature." I nodded in appreciation, but for some reason, Forne frowned.

"I could say the same to you. How are you able to deconstruct my plays each time? Magicians don't like it when people see through their tricks so easily."

I can't help it, okay? Down below, the Black Werewolf King dropped to his knees, and a new actor dashed onstage.

"Black Werewolf King, know that you do not fight alone! I swear on my royal blood that I shall stand with you wherever you go!"

He was handsome and muscular, and carried a prop bow in his hands. *That's gotta be Woroy.* The moment he loosed his arrow, the dancers dispersed. After they left, a young man with white face-paint walked onto the stage. That style of makeup was used in Wa's plays—since they were modeled after kabuki theater—but it probably seemed novel to Meraldians. The man was dressed in regal robes, and there was an arrow sticking out of his shoulder.

"I am the embodiment of the Nue's spirit, the nightmare that has plagued Wa for centuries. Mere humans such as yourselves cannot hope to defeat me!"

At that, the Black Werewolf King grinned and replied, "Unfortunately for you, I am no human!"

He put a wolf-shaped helmet on his head and wrapped a black-furred cloak around himself. *I guess that's supposed to represent my transformation.* Awed, the Nue took a trembling step backwards. The Black Werewolf King stepped

toward him, and he took another step back. Woroy raised his massive bow and advanced as well. Screaming, the Nue's incarnation fled the stage.

"Curse you, werewolf! If you won't heed my words, then face my wrath!"

The dancers clad in blue returned to the stage, surrounding the Black Werewolf King and Woroy. But neither of them looked intimidated.

"Compared to a Hero, this Nue is little more than a kitten."

"Indeed. So long as humans and demons work together, there is nothing in this world that we must fear!"

A beautiful woman dressed in a shrine maiden outfit ran over to the two actors. "Black Werewolf King, White Tiger, I have come to aid you."

"Your assistance is much appreciated, Lady Fumino."

According to Forne, the main heroine of each *Black Werewolf King* play was different, and it looked like Fumino was the lead of this one. *Wait, is it just me, or is Airia jealous?* She was clearly pouting. *What are you, five?*

"I see this theater also managed to find a beautiful actress to play Lady Fumino. Wouldn't you agree, Veight?"

"Err, I guess..."

Why are you asking me this? I'm blaming you if Airia gets mad at me, Forne! I turned back to the stage and realized I'd missed the part where everyone took down the Nue. I figured this was the end of the play, but to my surprise, the curtains only closed briefly to change up the set. When they opened again, the Black Werewolf King and Airia were sitting in a restaurant setting.

"It's thanks to your efforts that we were able to successfully forge an alliance with Wa, Lord Veight."

"It wasn't my strength alone that achieved this. This alliance was only possible because of everyone's cooperation."

Airia gave the Black Werewolf King an odd look and replied, "However, you— Ah!?"

She dropped the chopsticks she was holding, and the Black Werewolf King

gently took her hands in his.

“You hold them like this, Lady Airia.”

“Lord Veight...”

The two of them looked intently into each other’s eyes, and it was on that scene that the curtains fell.

I turned back to see Forne grinning at me. *Was this your plan all along!?*

“Well?”

Well, what?

“I prepared this little epilogue as my way of thanking you for choosing Veira as your honeymoon destination. What did you think of it?”

So this is your surprise present? I definitely wasn’t expecting something like this.

Unsurprisingly, Airia was quite pleased. “Wasn’t that a wonderful play, Veight!?”

“Y-Yeah...”

Aren’t you a bit too enamored with these plays, Airia? They’re just propaganda, you know. Well, whatever. As long as you’re happy, I’m happy. I smiled and said, “It was a spectacular performance. You’ve outdone yourself, Forne.”

“Oh, I know.”

Stop looking so smug.

One thing I’d learned after becoming a high-ranking member of the demon army was that nobles and VIPs were never allowed any privacy. That being said, I really didn’t want crowds staring at us as we walked through the streets. Just as I was thinking that, Forne offered a rather appealing alternative.

“Incidentally, our performance hall has a hot spring attached to it that you might want to experience.”

“By performance hall, you mean that huge fortress you built outside the city?”

“It is a *per-for-mance hall*,” Forne stressed, punctuating every syllable with a stamp of his foot.

Please stop, you’re scaring me. Though Veira was the city of craftsmen and heralded as the art capital of Meraldia, it also had a powerful military and sturdy fortifications. Not only did it have two layers of walls, but there was also a fortress outside the walls guarding the main gates. Of course, Veira had gotten away with this by telling the Senate the second wall was a mural, and the fortress was an outdoor performance hall. *You can get away with anything as long as you spin it right.*

That aside, I had no idea the “performance hall” had a hot spring as well. It sounded like a great way to relax, and we’d be able to escape the public eye as well. I gave my werewolf guards the rest of the day off, and decided to lounge in the hot spring with Airia. But as expected, Fahn, Monza, and Jerrick all elected to use their free time to hang out with us. *You guys know you can do whatever you want, right? You don’t have to follow us...*

Veira’s Honor Guard—which Forne claimed was just for show, but I knew was actually a highly trained force of elites—served as our guides to the fortress.

“Your Highness, Lord Veight, the hot spring is at the top of this hill,” one of the guards said, pointing to the peak of a steep mountain. *You call this a hill?* I wasn’t as good at horse riding as Airia and the others, so I had to take great care not to fall off as we ascended. Fahn and the others didn’t even bother trying to ride up and instead elected to walk. The road was a narrow path cut directly into the mountainside, so we had to advance single-file. There was a steep drop-off on one side, and a vast forest surrounded the mountain’s base.

Considering how rough this trail was, it was hard to believe a performance hall of any sort lay at the end. However, the road *was* designed to let anyone at the peak easily spot enemies approaching. Moreover, it was narrow enough to prevent an invading force from maintaining any semblance of a formation while they advanced. The road’s layout made no sense for a performance hall, but it

made perfect sense for a fortress.

Half-joking, I asked the guard, “Do you really hold music concerts and the like here?”

“No, there hasn’t been a single performance since it was built.”

Figures. Even if they did hold a play or a concert here, no one would be able to make it on schedule. They weren’t even trying to pretend this was a performance hall.

“This is the only mountain in Veira’s vicinity. Anyone trying to invade would absolutely want control of it, which is why it makes perfect sense to build a fortress here.”

“Very perceptive, Lord Veight. However please keep in mind that this is a performance hall,” the guard replied evenly.

If you want anyone to believe your guys’ third-rate act, you could at least make this road more accessible! Airia smiled wanly at me and I smiled back.

“They probably dug up a hot spring here so they would have a water source for the garrison,” I pointed out to her.

“I see you were very thorough with your performance hall’s amenities,” Airia mentioned slyly to the guard.

He saluted crisply to her and replied, “We are honored that you think so, Your Highness.”

Look, I don’t care what you call it, I just wanna soak in the hot spring already. As I sighed to myself, I suddenly heard a strange sound.

“Hm?”

But a second later the wind shifted, and the sound disappeared. *I could have sworn that was a...* Monza’s ears twitched, and she closed her eyes to concentrate.

“I can hear horses neighing in the distance, and wolves howling. I think I also heard a man and a woman’s screams.”

Monza was the hunter of our group, and her senses were the sharpest. A few

seconds later the wind shifted again and I picked up on the scent of humans, horses, and wolves in the distance.

“There’s one man and one woman, I think?”

“I don’t smell any blood yet. The wolves’ scent is the strongest, so there’s likely a lot of them.”

Fahn and Jerrick chimed in with their observations. *Oh yeah, they’re right.* From the looks of things, the two people were being chased by a pack of wolves. The wolves hadn’t caught up yet, but it was only a matter of time. We couldn’t afford to dally. The wind carrying the scent was blowing from the west. Unfortunately, west was a steep drop down the side of the mountain. The wolves were probably chasing the couple through the woods below. However, I could pick up the sounds of the wolves without transforming, so they couldn’t be that far away.

Airia gave me a questioning look and asked, “What’s going on?”

“It’s hard to see from here, but there are people down in that forest being chased by wolves. I’m going to go help them.”

I started to transform, but then stopped myself just in time. Most animals, including horses, started panicking when they saw a werewolf. Airia and the guards would be in danger if the horses started thrashing about on this narrow path. I needed to get out of the horses’ sight before transforming.

“I can’t transform until I’m in the forest. Airia, you guys go on ahead to the fort—I mean, performance hall.”

As I jumped off my horse, Airia held out a hand to me. “Get on. It’ll be faster if you ride down.”

“But...”

There was no way a horse could traverse such a steep slope. However, Airia just smiled and said, “Trust me.”

I really didn’t want to put my wife in danger, but I also knew Airia was a woman of her word. In the end, I decided to trust my wife.

“Alright. Our destination’s that way.”

I grabbed Airia's hand and got on behind her. Veira's guards and Fahn, Monza, and Jerrick stared at us in disbelief.

"Your Highness!?"

"Wait right there, you two!"

But Airia ignored all of them and dug her heels into her horse's flank, sending it galloping down the mountainside. *It's a good thing that you're decisive, but aren't you being a little too decisive here!?*

"Haaah!"

Airia spurred her horse on even faster, and we barreled down at breakneck speed. Though the slope looked nearly vertical, it was probably closer to a 40-degree grade. Airia's horse didn't even stumble as it crossed the uneven terrain, but I still couldn't shake the worry that Airia might fall and hurt herself.

"This is good enough, Airia! I can go the rest of the way by myself!"

"No, I'm coming with you! Besides, I can't stop my horse now even if I wanted to!"

Why do you look like you're enjoying this? Airia skillfully handled the reins, zig-zagging her horse around any obstructions in our path. I thought she'd had a more sheltered upbringing than this, but she was an unbelievably skilled rider.

"I never knew you were so good at riding horses!"

Turning around, I could see Veira's knights watching us with worried expressions. None of them were following after us. They were likely skilled horsemen as well, but I doubted they could match Airia. Meanwhile, she kept her gaze fixed firmly forward and replied, "I can only manage this because I'm riding my favorite horse! And thanks to my increased mana capacity, I can easily keep my balance and spot the stones in our path even at this speed!"

It certainly was true that Airia's kinetic vision and reflexes had been enhanced thanks to her mana, but that alone wouldn't be enough to accomplish such a feat. There really was nothing Airia couldn't do if she put her mind to it. But that was precisely why I respected her, and why I had so much faith in her capability. *Alright, from here on out, I'm never doubting her again.* The moment

I made that decision, this reckless race to the bottom suddenly felt a lot more fun.

“Let’s go, Airia! We need to hurry if we want to make it in time!”

“Hold on tight then!”

Smiling, Airia urged her horse on even faster. At this point, we were practically gliding down the slope. Within seconds, we were in the forest, and Airia was forced to slow down. The trees were too densely packed to maintain the gallop she’d been going at before.

“Airia, I’m gonna go on ahead! Follow after me as fast as you can!”

“Understood! Good luck!”

I leapt off the horse and transformed the moment I was out of its line of sight. My stiff formal clothes got torn to shreds, and I used the full force of my werewolf muscles to propel myself forward. The scent of humans gradually grew stronger, and for the moment, I still didn’t smell any blood. *I really hope I’m not too late.*

Forests were the perfect hunting grounds for a werewolf. Unlike regular wolves, we were able to climb trees. Launching surprise attacks from above was our specialty. Naturally, it was as effective on wolves as it was on any other animal.

“Over there!” I shouted, taking stock of the situation.

There was a single fallen horse, a young woman brandishing a crude staff, and a man standing protectively in front of her. The man had a short sword, but no shield or armor. The two of them were completely surrounded by a large pack of wolves. There were too many to count, but there were dozens of them at least. For the moment, the wolves were keeping their distance, gauging the threat level of their prey. Of course, they were likely planning on eating the humans too, but their main target had been the horse. Now that the horse was unable to move, the wolves were getting ready to move in for the kill. As far as I could tell, the humans were a married couple. The man raised his sword and threw a pebble at the wolves in a desperate attempt to intimidate them. He

could escape if he ran, but he was probably trying to protect his wife.

“Dear, please, leave me and go!” the young woman shouted.

“I’d rather die than abandon you!” the man shouted back.

Those words struck a deep chord within me. Time was of the essence, so I immediately unleashed my strongest spell.

“AWOOOOOOOOOOO!”

My Soul Shaker shook the trees, and the wolves all turned to me. I’d arrived from downwind, so they hadn’t noticed my approach. The moment they realized what they were dealing with, they ran away with their tails tucked between their legs. I strode forward, making it clear to the wolves that the humans were under my protection. Their scent grew steadily fainter until eventually, it vanished. The wolves had completely given up on their prey. All animals instinctively knew that werewolves were at the top of the food chain.

“A good hunter knows when to give up on their prey,” I muttered softly to myself, breathing a sigh of relief.

“A-A werewolf...” the young man stammered.

“That I am.”

I considered transforming back, but then I remembered all my clothes got ripped. Normally, I wore loose pants that could survive a transformation, but if I transformed right now, I’d be buck naked, and that would be awkward. *Do I stay a menacing black werewolf, or bear the shame of letting these two see me naked?* While I was debating which was the better option, the man pointed his sword at me. Though he wasn’t attacking, he clearly saw me as a threat.

“Wh-Who’re you!? If you’re a werewolf, you know about the Black Werewolf King, right!? He’ll punish any demon who tries to harm innocent people, you know!”

I know, because I’m him. I opened my mouth to resolve the misunderstanding, but just then I heard the sound of hoofbeats and Airia burst into the clearing.

“You did it, Veight!”

The fact that she'd stopped asking me if I was alright whenever I did something dangerous proved that she trusted me quite a bit now. Either that, or she'd just given up and accepted that I was going to do as I pleased.

Airia slid down from her horse and said in a regal voice, "Sheathe your weapon! I am the Meraldian Commonwealth's Demon Lord, Airia Lutt Aindorf! And this werewolf is my husband, Veight Von Aindorf!"

The couple turned hesitantly to me.

"You're...Veight?"

"Really?"

Airia threw her cape to me, and I wrapped it around myself. As soon as I was presentable I transformed back into a human. I still looked pretty silly wearing just a cape, but I attempted to sound as regal as Airia.

"I am Veight Von Aindorf, the man who'll punish any demon who tries to harm innocent people. Are you two alright? You're safe now that Veira's honor guard and the demon army are here."

Relieved, the couple's legs gave out under them, and they slid to the floor. They exchanged a brief glance, then turned back to me.

"Th-Thank you very much for saving us."

You're welcome.

"Man, this brings back memories of my old life," I muttered, basking in the hot spring.

The day was coming to a close, and I watched the sun slowly sink beneath the horizon. Because of how late we'd reached the fortress, Airia and I had decided to spend the night here. We had the "VIP guest baths"—aka the pool reserved for the fortress' officers—all to ourselves. The view from the bath was stunning; you could see the whole forest and all of Veira from here. The two of us watched in companionable silence as the sun's final rays vanished and evening transformed to night. Airia had been pretty nervous at first, since this was her first time in an open-air bath. But now she looked like she was right at home.

The cool night breeze served as the perfect complement to the warm water. *If I'd been able to enjoy more baths like this in my past life, maybe I would have lived longer. Well, I guess that doesn't matter now.*

"I didn't think we'd end up rescuing people on our honeymoon," I said with a wry smile.

"Apparently, they're on a pilgrimage from the north. Thank goodness we were able to rescue them in time."

"Yeah, especially since the wife was pregnant."

They were lucky we happened to be passing by when we did. The two of them were a newlywed couple from Bahen who'd come to Veira to pray for a safe delivery. A Sonnenlicht saint who'd been a famous midwife was from Veira, and many pregnant women made pilgrimages to her tomb. At first, the couple had traveled with a merchant caravan, but on the way, the wife's morning sickness had gotten so bad that they'd been forced to stop and rest while the caravan went on ahead. When they resumed their journey, they made a wrong turn just before Veira and got lost in the forest.

"The demon army is patrolling all the major highways in Meraldia, so if they'd just waited, they could have gotten a demon squad to escort them," Airia muttered.

I shook my head and replied, "The demon army practically destroyed Bahen, so its citizens are still scared of demons. They wouldn't have trusted a demon escort. Our violent invasion of the north is the demon army's biggest shame."

The couple's horse had been growing tired from the constant travel, and the wolves came right as it ran out of stamina. Had we not found them, they would undoubtedly have been eaten. It was a stroke of luck that they survived, but it bothered me that there were still regions in Meraldia where it was this dangerous. *Travelers shouldn't have to fear for their lives.*

"They've probably finished their pilgrimage by now, huh?"

"I imagine so. We've already made their acquaintance, so why don't we escort them part of the way back?"

Smiling, I mimicked the actor who'd played me earlier and bowed deeply to

Airia. "As you command, my Demon Lord."

I guess the road from Ryunheit to Bahen would be the safest. Once we got them to Thuvan, we could ask Firnir to spare some kentauros to take them the rest of the way. But if traveling was still this dangerous, the custom of going on a honeymoon would never spread. I let out a long sigh.

"Meraldia's finally at peace, but there's still danger lurking everywhere..."

"Indeed. We'll have to work hard to ensure people can travel safely. I suppose we can start by expanding the road network and building smaller towns in between them."

Airia was a workaholic like me, so even during our vacation, she kept bringing up work. *I need to change the topic or we'll be discussing infrastructure for the next few hours.*

"By the way, there's something I've come to realize after marrying you."

"There is?" Airia cocked her head, her interest piqued.

I looked down at the forest and said wistfully, "I know what it feels like to be desperate to protect your wife now. Before, I might have been able to understand in my head what that man was feeling, but now I know that feeling intimately."

Naturally, I'd saved a lot of people since coming to Meraldia. Some of those people had been couples like the one I'd saved today. I thought I'd understood that those couples loved each other very much, but I hadn't really *felt* it the way I did now. If it was to protect Airia, I wouldn't even balk at fighting a thousand Heroes. One way or another, I'd beat them all down. Whatever it took to keep Airia safe, I'd do.

I could tell the man I'd saved today had felt the same way when he'd been staring down those wolves. He was willing to throw his life away if that was what it took to protect his wife. That was something I could respect.

"In order to protect those they love, people can become unbelievably strong. I'm sure that man managed to survive as long as he did because of how desperately he wanted to protect his wife. It's a good thing his struggles didn't end in vain."

“You really are a kind man, you know that?”

“Ahahaha.” Blushing, I splashed some water onto my face. “Anyway, what I’m trying to say is there’s some things you just can’t understand until you experience them for yourself.”

Airia gave me a knowing smile and said, “Yes, of course. I agree completely.”

Her face was a little red too, and I was sure it wasn’t because of the heat of the water.

Afterword

Greetings, readers. Hyougetsu here. I realize this is a random topic to bring up, but it's been about five years since I got married. My daughters get to monopolize my wife now, which makes me a little sad. But that's enough about my personal life. We finally get to see Veight married in this volume. Whether marriage brings happiness or misfortune depends on the person, I think. But considering Veight's personality, I knew from the start that he'd eventually have to get married. He's too much of a family man not to. Plus, he's popular with the ladies.

This has come up multiple times in the books now, but Veight really doesn't understand women. Emotions like love are pretty far removed from logic, and he always tries to puzzle things out as logically as possible so it's not surprising he's a bit dense when it comes to love. There are also a few things that happened in his past life, but we'll save those spoilers for later. ...I actually based a lot of his past life from events in my child—whoops, I started talking about myself again there, didn't I?

Anyway, I've gotten quite a few questions about Veight's past life, and it looks like most of you guys want to know what happened. Unfortunately, I feel like it would be going against the flow of the plot to focus on it, so if I do ever end up writing about Veight's past life, it'll probably be in a side story or a different novel altogether. I do have a properly fleshed out backstory for him, since it'd be hard to write his character otherwise. Perceptive readers might have noticed me dropping hints here and there about what happened, so I'm sure a few of you have a vague idea of how things went for him before. I will say he had a pretty normal life overall. He was as average as they come, and the reason I'm writing this story at all is because I want to showcase just how amazing "average" people can be.

And with that, I'd like to move on to the acknowledgments.

As always, a big thank you to Nishi(E)da-sensei for his wonderful illustrations.

I know you're flooded with work, but thank you for always taking the time to make *Der Werwolf's* illustrations shine. I'd also like to thank my proofreader, the cover designer, and everyone else who helped make this publication a reality. And of course, a big thank you to my editor Fusanon, aka Saitou-sama. You are my lord and savior. All the stylish effects you see in the print edition were his idea, so if you liked them, you better thank him, too. Last but not least are you, the readers. I'm eternally grateful that you've stuck with me for this long, occasionally meandering story. It's because of you that we've made it all the way to volume 9.

Speaking of which, Veight has gotten married now, but his story is far from over. If anything, the real climax is up ahead. His job might have been hard, but learning to be a good husband is going to be way harder. He's both the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander and the Demon Lord's husband, so if anything, he's going to be busier than ever before. You'll get to see a glimpse of what travails await him soon, so I hope we meet again in volume 10.



"I heard the extra
chapter had a hot
springs trip in it, so
I drew this."

Nishi(E)da

"Congratulations on
the release of volume 9!"

Kosumi Yuuchi

胡三澄 胡三澄



Bonus Short Story

—Airia's Letter—

Dear Father,

I recently got married to Veight. I know you wanted me to have a grand wedding, but I'm afraid my ceremony was far from conventional. Normally in a Sonnenlicht wedding, the groom enters the chapel from the north entrance, retracing the steps of the ancient saints who sought after the sun. The guests applaud as the groom heads south, a symbolic representation of the demons and heretics who obstructed the saints during their journey. It is only by overcoming those obstacles that the groom can reach the sun, where his bride resides. At least, that was how you explained the ceremony to me, Father.

When I saw Veight walking up to the altar, your words came back to me. My first meeting with Veight was when he broke through my window. Back then, he was the commander of an invading army. I've been recalling that moment more and more frequently, recently. It's strange how a werewolf tasked with conquering Meraldia ended up becoming one of its top officials. Not only that, but he's done more for this country than anyone else. Most importantly, though, he liberated me from my suffering. It's rather embarrassing to admit, but his trust in me was what allowed me to regain confidence in myself, and the path I chose.

Veight is both a master strategist and a peerless warrior. However, despite his talent for war, he is a gentle soul who prefers solving problems with words rather than conflict. He has a few strange quirks, but I find most of them charming. For example, his fashion sense is truly baffling. All of his shirts have strange patterns on them that clash with his pants. He also tends to start working without fixing his bed head. The thing I like most about him, though, is how fervently he tries to share his joy with others. Whenever he comes across a new dish he loves, he'll immediately look for people to share it with. Despite

being a werewolf, he acts like a human. It turns out the reason for that is because he was a human in his past life. Moreover, he lived his past life in a completely different world from ours.

He was the one who suggested I pen this letter. According to him, it was customary in his old world for people to write letters of gratitude to their parents and read them aloud when they got married. In my opinion, that's a wonderful tradition. Unfortunately, you are gone and buried, and Mother died before I even got the chance to know her. I thought it would be embarrassing to give a speech on my personal feelings to people who weren't even present, so I decided to keep this letter private.

Do you think I managed to find a good husband, Father? Personally, I can't imagine being with anyone else. Even if you were alive and against our union, I think I still would have married Veight anyway. I'm a nefarious Demon Lord now, so it's not as though you would be able to stop me. I can imagine how fed up you'd be if that were the case. But knowing you, I'm sure you would accept my choice. You always put my happiness first, after all.

I may not have been the perfect daughter, but I hope you'll continue watching over me from heaven. The things you taught me are my most valuable treasures. I love you, Father. Thank you for raising me.

Sincerely, Airia.

—Veight's Letter—

Dear Friedensrichter,

I told Airia she should write a letter to her deceased father, and she said only would if I wrote one to my parents as well. I've already told my mom and Master in person everything I might write in a letter, and I never got to know my dad, so the most I could do for him was visit his grave. I did write letters to my past life's parents, but they were pretty short. In the end, I feel like you're the person I really should be writing a letter to. So here I am.

I got married to Airia the other day. My mental image of weddings is the couple riding a gondola while smoke from dry ice fills the background, but

naturally, weddings in this world aren't as fancy as movie weddings on Earth. Though, in my generation, there were rich people doing weddings like that in real life, too. In fact, that's what one of my cousins did for her wedding. Airia explained to me how weddings in Meraldia follow some ancient Sonnenlicht custom, but I already forgot the contents of the myth it's based on. I'll ask her again later to refresh my memory.

Anyway, you met Airia back when you were alive, so you know she's a progressive, intelligent, and brave young lady. She shares the same goals as me, so maybe it was inevitable that I'd end up marrying her. Everyone's hyping up our wedding as a historic benchmark of demon-human coexistence too—or, most everyone anyway. I know there are a few hardline conservatives who are pissed about it. I feel kind of bad since this is really just a marriage of two humans. Plus, this makes it even harder to publicly come out about the fact that I'm a reincarnated human. I wish I could complain to you about all of this, but you just had to go and die on me. You better have been reincarnated somewhere. You deserve that much at least.

By the way, the demon army you founded is now the strongest force on the continent. Half the reason people were willing to negotiate with me was because my words were backed by the might of your army. I'm hoping that going forward we can build a relationship of trust and mutual cooperation with other nations though, so we don't have to rely on military might. You brought over your organizational skills from your past life while I brought over my diplomatic skills. Together, we can hopefully make the demon army into something truly great. Honestly, the more I think about it, the more I realize all of the demon army's prowess is based on human wisdom. Humans are social creatures, and they're craftier and more tenacious than any other species, so it makes sense that they'd be the most advanced species. Man, humans really are terrifying. Don't you agree, Friedensrichter?

Oh yeah, were you married in your past life? This is my first time getting married in either life, and the only other married person I know is another Meraldian viceroy. He's a goddamn weirdo though, so I can't really go to him for advice most of the time. I guess I saw how much Ivan cared for his dead wife and how passionate Dillier's love was for Shallier, but I can't really apply

anything I learned from them to my own love life. There are also my parents from my past life too, but...I *really* don't wanna end up like them.

Honestly, I'm not sure what makes a good husband or a good father. You're probably the only role model I can use as a reference, which is why I ended up writing this letter. I'm not the only one who looked up to you, either. Shure and a bunch of the other demon army generals all told me you were like a father figure to them. The more I think about it, the more I realize I'll probably do alright if I just follow your example.

You know, I thought marriage would be a really nerve-wracking thing, but every time I see Airia's face, whatever worries I might've had just vanish. She's the only woman I fell in love with over two lifetimes, so it stands to reason that she's the best possible wife I could ask for. The only problem is whether or not I'm good enough for her. All I can do is try my best. I have no idea if we'll be able to have children or not, but if we do, I hope you come see them. Even if you look different because you've reincarnated, I'll recognize you. In the meantime, I'll keep working toward realizing your dream.

Thank you so much for everything, Friedensrichter. By the way, would it be alright if I called you Dad like some of the other demon army soldiers do? I'm your vice-commander, so I've got that right, don't I? See you around, Dad.

- Veight.

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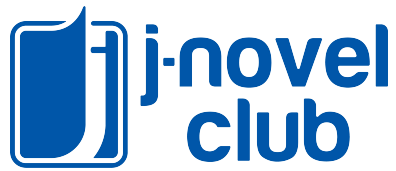
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Der Werwolf: The Annals of Veight Volume 9

by Hyougetsu

Translated by Ningen Edited by Meiru

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Ebook edition 1.0: October 2020